

CENTRE D'ÉTUDES DU RELIGIEUX CONTEMPORAIN  
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# **REDISCOVERING AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY THROUGH TRANSFIGURATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This essay will offer a reflection upon a synthesis of various scriptural, patristic and contemporary sources in examining the event of the Transfiguration of Christ as the *preeminent* mystical event of the Gospel that provides a key for unlocking the deeper spiritual meanings and connections of this awesome manifestation of God towards the rediscovery of an authentic Christian mystical spirituality. The focus of the essay will be to unearth the timeless teachings of the early Christian Church and how it has been transmitted down through the generations to flower into the mystical theology and practice of what is now broadly referred to as the Eastern Christian Tradition. Arguably, the culmination of the expression of this knowledge was St. Gregory Palamas' elaboration of the vision of God through the Taboric Light, the experience of which, convinces us that union with God is indeed a possibility which empowers us to move towards God and see him "face to face" (Num 12:8)<sup>1</sup>. We will draw upon the scriptural passages in which this theology is rooted to emphasize that it was always a vital part of the Christian heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

The event of the Transfiguration of Christ (Metamorphosis) is seemingly one of the strangest events during Christ's mission, yet the grandeur of its spiritual implications cannot be overemphasized. There are many questions surrounding this event for which, gratefully, our patristic texts provide us with answers; however, what does this event mean for us today in the modern world? It seems oftentimes that the godlessness which marked the world at the time of Christ has not changed much. People are still—and always will be—in need of the gentle, loving God Whom they can *know* personally; not some evasive Being beyond our reach, but the God that desires to be known, a God that is real, and—importantly—a spirituality that makes sense; one that continuously rejuvenates and elevates the soul. This aspiration can be realized by rediscovering the deeper meanings of the event of the Transfiguration which not only makes God's personal presence and interest in us a verifiable certainty but opens the cosmic doors of wonders and potentialities in this life and the next.

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<sup>1</sup>The King James Version of the Bible will be used throughout this essay.

This event is beyond anything that the mind of man<sup>2</sup> can possibly conceive, yet when aided by divine grace, it is not beyond non-rational experience. In fact, as we will present in this essay, it is the event *par excellence* that allows man to enter into unity with God. The Taboric Light is ever-present, permeating all of creation and echoed repeatedly in Scripture as an ancient and ‘secret’ key that unlocks the Heavens, and two thousand years later, it remains, beckoning for us to discover it, enter into it, and see the Light for ourselves. As we shall see later, the theology of St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) lures us into this mystery; enticing more Western Christians to take a second look behind the intriguing mysteries of the Transfiguration or what is often referred to as ‘Neo-Palamism’.

The concreteness and similarities of the Transfiguration event as expressed in the narratives of the Synoptic Gospels, creates an explorative attitude in us that is indeed difficult to resist, leaving us wanting, wondering, what really happened up on that “high mountain”? If we attempt to rationally contemplate the “how” of this appearance of the Light of God it leaves us as blinded as St. Paul and as in awe and in fear as Peter, James and John. However, if we accept the historical account, then we must accept this Vision of Light as a Theophany of God, and consequently its transformative power as a cosmic mystical experience that can restore man’s darkened vision by boarding on a *joyous journey through Light* to “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Ps. 2:11) from “glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18) in this world and the next.

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘man’ will be used throughout this essay to denote ‘humanity’.

## CHAPTER 1: THE SEARCH FOR AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

### 1. Mysticism and Spirituality in the Early Church

#### 1.1 The Role of Tradition

Our post-modern society affords us an array of spiritual possibilities for the religious or the secular alike to form a personal definition of spirituality; one that can provide a sense of connection to the ‘divine’ or yet, a sense of ‘transcendence’ to a supernatural realm, in order to establish a ‘way of life’ and arrive at a life-purpose based on realities conceived from these subjective personal experiences.

Taking on this anthropocentric emphasis, spirituality is defined today in many ways, oftentimes without the interference of a faceless God. For Christians, however, the face of God has been identified as that of Jesus Christ which fulfills the prophesies of the Jews. This truth was so compelling that it had to be guarded from those who were uninitiated in this reality.<sup>3</sup>

The word ‘tradition’ is often used abstractly and diminished in value because it is misunderstood. The early Christian Tradition was characterized and formed largely through its defence of heretical ideas that were known to be foreign to the teachings of Christianity and distracted man from the empirical knowledge of the Truth of God as witnessed by the Apostles and their disciples after them. This knowledge was not based on personal conceptions but rather, transmitted by Christ through the Holy Spirit. Thus, for the early Christian, there was no spirituality without the Holy Spirit. Vladimir Lossky describes Tradition as the revelation of the truths of faith that is transmitted in two modes: oral preaching and writing, and the oral always precedes the written.<sup>4</sup>

The written also includes the writings of the Fathers of the Church whose authority has been recognized by the Church as revealing or elaborating on the truth of the oral Tradition. As heresies arose, the need to preach the guarded secret treasures of the oral Tradition emerged to gradually be shared with the world “which could not be set aside or underestimated without

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<sup>3</sup> C.f. Vladimir LOSSKY. *In the Image and Likeness of God*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001, p. 144-145.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

injury to the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> This oral knowledge is thus indispensable to the life of the Church and its members who bear witness to the hidden mysteries behind the ultimate goal of the Christian which is to **unite** with God. Lossky explains that we have *separated* Scripture from Tradition “instead of distinguishing them, the latter [i.e. Tradition] is projected onto the written or oral testimonies, which are added to the Holy Scripture, accompanying or following it.”<sup>6</sup> Everything is therefore a tool towards this ultimate purpose of unity with God and just like icons that we use to venerate the saints who are a reflection of Christ, both books and icons will not be necessary in the other life where we will have the *Living Word* before us. Lossky says that “It might even be said: the Church could dispense with the Scriptures, but she could not exist without Tradition.”<sup>7</sup>

The goal of unity with God, the *Living Word*, therefore must be based on a theocentric approach towards restoring man “in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26). To achieve union with God was never a question of *possibility* for the early Church, but rather the *manner* that man should set about achieving this union in the most effective way through the knowledge gained and transmitted to the Apostles. It is this knowledge and the teachings of Scripture that defines the Tradition of the Church, and the development of its spirituality was—as expressed by Lossky, “dominated by the constant preoccupation...to safeguard...the possibility of attaining to the fullness of the mystical union.”<sup>8</sup> Lossky goes on to define this *raison d’être* of the “true worshippers” (John 4:23) as the “mystical centre”<sup>9</sup> of Christian dogma which gradually unfolded through the rising of heresies that threatened this primordial Christian aspiration of unity with God, and through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—the *Theanthropos* (the ‘Godman’), the ‘Light of God’ which was revealed many times through the prophets and culminating in the event of the Transfiguration of Christ was *always* understood as the basis of the belief in the possibility of union with God, and through this unity, man finds salvation.

The Tradition of the Church was inherited from the Judaic Tradition which was fulfilled in the Incarnation of God and came to full realization in the Taboric Light of Christ through the Holy

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Spirit at Pentecost. It is this Tradition that preceded the written Gospel and therefore taking an approach of literal interpretation of the Gospel is limited because it doesn't allow man to dive into the mystical spiritual truths of the Tradition from which the Gospel was written. Christ is the Gospel, the *Logos*, the Word, and He cannot be interpreted, He can only be *known*. Man's jostling motion through life is nothing else but an inherent ontological instinct to know Him *personally*. How one sets ahead to do this will determine one's interpretation of, and consequently, the quality of one's life. The event of the Transfiguration of Jesus is beyond interpretation; it is Truth revealed, and offers a gateway into a life of unending anticipations of joy.

## **1.2 The Western Latin Christian Tradition**

It is often said that the Eastern and Western Traditions of the Church are simply two expressions of the same Truth, however, since the Great Schism of 1054, we have seen more expanded distances in theology. In the West, although the gradual introduction and emphasis on intellectualism through the medieval period and Scholasticism had a profound effect on the spirituality of its Tradition, we have seen some mystical figures such as Teresa of Avila on contemplative prayer and John of the Cross.

Along with works such as the anonymous mystic work of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14<sup>th</sup> cc), St. John's works, mainly, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the Scholastic school of thought in the West (1100-1700), nonetheless, it draws from the mystical work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5<sup>th</sup> cc) in its journey towards God, and has had great influence on writers such as T.S. Eliot and Thomas Merton as well as on the mystical spirituality of the Roman Catholic Church. Both Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross cultivated 'mental prayer' as the basis of reaching perfection and holiness. The Benedictine practice of *Lectio Divina* which received dogmatic assent at the Second Vatican Council, is a four-step process: read, meditate, pray, contemplate. By meditative and contemplative means, the goal is to raise the heart and the mind to God, however, God remains nonetheless transcendent and the emphasis is on contemplation. This method also involves the imagination where one enters into the event being read and proceeds to contemplate its deeper meaning intellectually and emotionally.



### 1.3 The Eastern Christian Tradition

For Eastern Christians, God is both transcendent and immanent and not only a matter of reaching a state of perfection through contemplation, but actual *union* with the divine God is possible through the *uncreated* energies of God. In Chapter 3 we will discuss this topic further which was elaborated by St. Gregory Palamas, but the basis of his theology is that there is a distinction between the *uncreated essence* and the *uncreated energies* of God allowing man to therefore be *deified* or undergo *theosis*, which is a mystical union with God. We will explore this in greater depth later.

In the Roman Catholic Church, the energies of God are believed to be *created*, which follows the emphasis of their doctrine of the one essence of the Trinity and they hold a distinction between the light of glory and the light of grace—both created.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, in the West, the great mystic, Pseudo-Dionysius was clearly felt through the figures we mentioned above, as well as the works of the pre-schism mystical theologian, St. Maximus the Confessor. Tutored by St. Sophronius on the works of Dionysius, Maximus' *theologia* was an aspiration towards intimate knowledge of God<sup>11</sup>. In the East, these works flowered into the *hesychast* tradition which was defended by St. Gregory Palamas and naturally developed from the doctrine of the East that God is in fact immanent and *wholly* knowable in his uncreated energies. As we will see some examples later in chapter 2 on “image and likeness”, Maximus' cosmic theological scope unravels for us the beauty of the *transfigured* cosmos.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Dionysius, these mystical writings are of something beyond what is revealed by contemplation alone but rather a gift of an eschatological vision of the Taboric Light to be shared with all.

In the East, authentic spirituality is not based on acquiring knowledge about God through rationality, speculation (imagination) or contemplative emotionalism but rather, the uncreated light of the Transfiguration is the cornerstone of Eastern spirituality based on apodictic truths and methods as revealed in the living saints, and based on the hesychastic tradition which we will outline in Chapter 3 in more detail.

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<sup>10</sup> C.f. Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, [...], p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> C.f. Paul M. BLOWERS and Robert Louis WILKEN. *Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor on the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

## 1.4 The Fathers of the Church

In both the East and the West, the Fathers of the Church were considered of ‘one mind’ and maintained the oral teachings of the Christian faith despite the differences in dogma and ecclesiology that later arose from their respective patristic theologies. However, the Protestant theological doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* was a rupture of 1500 years of continued transmittance of knowledge to be replaced by the divinely inspired Bible; in effect, doing away with the very authority through which Scripture was revealed.

In order to appreciate the importance of the oral tradition which culminated in the mystical experience of the uncreated energies of God—at least for Eastern spirituality—we need to review some characteristics of the Fathers and their influence on the spirituality behind the Taboric Light and the possibility for man to achieve theosis.

The transmittance of the Tradition through the Apostles to the Fathers is beyond a legalistic interpretation of Apostolic Authority, but presents to us a real and ontological view of the history of mankind as it is revealed through Scripture. The “Christ event” is the center and basis of interpretation of all of history. Past history and the eschatological future are constantly revealed to us through the Fathers and will culminate in the fullness of understanding at the Final Judgement. Therefore, the list of Fathers has possibly not yet been completed. Each person can only understand their particular time in history by doing God’s Will and having it revealed to them by the Holy Spirit through their gradual transfiguration. Nellas explains, “Christ, as the highest realization of man, naturally constitutes the goal of mankind’s upward journey, the beginning but also the end of history.”<sup>13</sup>

The historical interpretative and illuminating power of the Fathers can perhaps be summarized as follows: A ‘Father’ means in a pastoral sense and as a teacher; they connect us with the Church through the Holy Spirit because of their love for the Church and the people; they have a specific charisma and responsibility for their particular era to write and preach against heresies; they knew the Holy Scriptures well and the Fathers before them, and continued the transmittance of truth from the Apostles through the illumination of the Holy Spirit; they did not re-invent Christ

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<sup>13</sup> Panayiotis NELLAS. *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997, p. 35.

but expressed Him as He truly *is*; they expressed the inexpressible because of the clarity of their *mind* (Gk. '*nous*')<sup>14</sup> which was without delusion and based on the reality of Light; their teachings have been proven over time, and one has to enter into this reality in order to bear witness to it.

Fr. John Chryssavgis explains that the Fathers present us with a “personal dialogue and relationship...and just as any conversation can be misunderstood or misinterpreted ... History, is then, a question of [correct] deciphering and communication.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we could say that the Fathers in their persons act as “agents”<sup>16</sup> in history to reveal the eschatological realization of the Kingdom of Heaven in *this* world. As we will see later in the icon of the Transfiguration, the mandorla around Christ is an iconographic representation of the Kingdom’s actual presence in the world evidenced by Christ’s words, “...the Kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21), which is followed by the direct link of Heaven and earth, “For as the lightning, that lighteneth out of the one *part* under heaven, shineth unto the other *part* unto heaven; so shall the Son of man be in his day.” (Luke 17:24). This is the lightning of the Transfiguration, and as St. Gregory the Theologian described, the Fathers were “earthquakes” on the ground through the illuminating Thunder that vibrated to them from the “lightning” in the sky.

Chryssavgis explains that we need to “recover this eschatological dimension of time unfolding from the Alpha to the Omega, or rather unveiled *in* the Alpha and the Omega”<sup>17</sup> and the Fathers are facilitators to engage in the inner logic of historical events which is “identified with the divine Logos.”<sup>18</sup> The Cross of Christ is described by the Fathers as the “gateway of all mysteries”<sup>19</sup> and history is revealed to man through this Cross. According to the Eastern Tradition, the great paradox of space and time is that man works out his salvation in time from birth to death, and concurrently, “time is the locus of *theosis*: living in fellowship with the uncreated, timeless God.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mind, or *intellect* is also defined as the *nous* or ‘divine reason’; the faculty of the mind that can contemplate God, or the innermost “I”.

<sup>15</sup> John CHRYSOCHRISTOS. *The Way of the Fathers: Exploring the Patristic Mind*, Thessaloniki, Greece, 1998, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13, C.f. Isaac the Syrian, *Mystic Treatises*, LXXIX, P. 365.

<sup>20</sup> Anton VRAME. *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way*, Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999, p. 113.

Like a cross, man can only move in four directions: sideways, up or down. Sideways in either direction is simply ‘coping’ through life for which the Lord says, “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold or hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” (Rev 3:16). Upward towards the Taboric Light to transcend time is our goal, and downward is better than sideways still, as it can serve as the lever by which man can recognize his folly and be quickly propelled upward. Sometimes all we need is even a distant reminder in the depth of our mind of the Transfiguration of Christ and His love brings us softly out of our predicament by restoring our spiritual compass upward towards the ‘high mountain’.

### **1.5 Ancient Eastern Traditions**

A lot of Westerners who are dissatisfied with Christianity without being aware of the potentialities offered through the Taboric Light, are attracted to the Ancient Eastern traditions such as Yoga and Buddhism and the appealing esoteric flavour of the martial arts where one can learn to master the ‘self’. In Eastern Christianity, however, the ‘self’ is defined quite differently as we will see later.

From the *Logos* of the ancient Greeks to the *Tao* of the ancient Chinese, the heart of man yearns for God, for it knows—despite the polemics of the ego—that there is a Source of Life regardless of how we choose to define Him. This yearning will never be satisfied unless man can discover an authentic spirituality. In a very interesting study by Hieromonk Damascene, he takes us through the ancient truth and philosophy of the *Tao Teh Ching* of Lao Tzu to reveal that this Tao is Christ Himself—the Logos. In his own words, “Of all the ancient philosophers, Lao Tzu came the closest to assimilating the essence of reality and describing the Tao or Logos. His *Tao Teh Ching* represents the epitome of what a human being can know through intuition, through the apprehension of the universal Principle and Pattern manifested in the created order.”<sup>21</sup> He argues further that although this Tao is the “highest that a person can know through intuition, [but] St. John’s Gospel represents the highest that a person can know through revelation...and experienced in the most tangible way possible.”<sup>22</sup> Hieromonk Damascene thus challenges the reader to move beyond the pre-Christian Tao and rediscover the spirituality of the early Church

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<sup>21</sup> Hieromonk DAMASCENE. *Christ the Eternal Tao*, Valaam Books, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, California, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

if they are to find the authentic Tao or Logos. He provides an entire ‘re-write’ based on the *Tao Teh Ching* for one to discover Christ through the intuitive vision of Lao Tzu. In his own words, he calls it the “New Testament of the *Tao Teh Ching*.”<sup>23</sup>

## CHAPTER 2: THE MOTION OF GOD TOWARDS MAN

### 2.1 The Self-Emptying (Kenosis) of God

In the Old Testament, man was seeking God, and now through the Incarnation of God, He is ‘moving’ towards man to open the cosmic potentialities of man and restore his image and his ultimate salvation. God, however, is motionless in the sense that He is in “absolute repose and His perfect unmovability places him outside space and time”<sup>24</sup>, but if we attribute any motion to Him, it is in relation to His creatures by producing in them “the love which makes them tend towards Himself.”<sup>25</sup>

The ‘self-emptying’ of God or *kenosis* from the Greek ‘ekenose’ (ἐκενώσε) comes from Philippians 2:7, “But made himself of no reputation [ἐκενώσε], and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man.” This kenosis of God is due to his love for mankind and His divine Will to unite with man. For this reason, the patristic tradition says that man was made in the image of God in order that Christ could assume a body in His image and likeness.

As we will discuss in more detail in chapter three, closely related to kenosis, is the Eastern Christian doctrine of ‘deification’ or *theosis* where it is believed that man can acquire union with God Himself through His uncreated energies. God having taken human nature affords the possibility of man’s divinization. In the words of St. Athanasius, “For He was made man that we might be made God.”<sup>26</sup> For Eastern Christianity union with God is the *raison d’être* of the Christian faith and the basis of interpretation of the Transfiguration event. Fr. John Meyendorff

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002, p. 98.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Sant ATHANASIUS. *The Incarnation*, <http://newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm> (page consulted on 2018-11-24), 54:3.

states that deification or *theosis* (union with God) is the “true purpose of creation...not contemplation of divine essence, which is inaccessible, but communion in divine energy, transfiguration, and transparency to divine action in the world.”<sup>27</sup>

The concept of kenosis was also valued and understood by Lao Tzu. Hieromonk Damascene writes, “Christ did much more than reveal who God is. Through His coming, man not only achieves the self-emptying that Lao Tzu valued so much; now in a way unknown before, his immortal spirit becomes wholly filled with the Divinizing, Uncreated Energy—Grace or *Teh*—of God.”<sup>28</sup> In the Acts of the Apostles, the first Christians referred to their faith as “the way” (Acts 19:9)<sup>29</sup> and the Tao literally means “way” but was extended to mean “the way”.<sup>30</sup>

Archmandrite Vasileios who spent most of his life as a monk and Abbot on Mount Athos, writes that human pride is the antithesis of kenosis as an, “alienation from the mystery of the Church of the Incarnate Word, which is a mystery of self-emptying, of utter humility, poverty and obedience unto death, and also, for this reason, the source of the salvation, resurrection and deification of human nature.”<sup>31</sup> The Incarnation therefore is the self-emptying movement of God towards man, so that man can know God through the Second Person of the Trinity, for which man must reciprocate and self-empty before God in an effort to move towards the vision of the light of God in order to be deified. Olivier Clément comments that the human being is “an enigma, a mystery which we enter only through the revelation of love”<sup>32</sup> and we need to re-discover a “mystical and liturgical vision of the cosmos” through the Incarnation and the “kenosis (emptying) [of God].”<sup>33</sup>

In the next section we will explore the concept of the ‘person’ in more detail, but for now, we will review it briefly. Lossky connects the identification of the person and true existence itself with the kenosis of Jesus through emulation, when he says, “the perfection of the person consists

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<sup>27</sup> John MEYENDORFF. *Byzantine Theology*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1979, p. 133.

<sup>28</sup> Hieromonk DAMASCENE. *Christ the Eternal Tao*, [...], p. 275.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia. *Tao Teh Ching*, (page consulted on 2018-11-19), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao\\_Te\\_Ching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao_Te_Ching).

<sup>31</sup> Archmandrite VASILEIOS. *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984, p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT. *You are Peter: An Orthodox Theologian’s Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy*, Hyde Park, New York, New City Press, 2003, p. 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

in self-abandonment: the person expresses itself most truly in that it renounces to exist for itself<sup>34</sup> since the kenosis of the Second Person of God is His “mode of existence”<sup>35</sup> and Christ’s greater manifestation is revealed “to all those who are able to recognize greatness in abasement, wealth in spoliation, liberty in obedience.”<sup>36</sup> These greater manifestations are revealed in the Transfiguration of Christ, where those who have climbed Tabor behold the mysteries of God.

The kenosis of God is also reflected in the iconographic tradition of the Church through the garments of Christ which are shown as both red and blue. The red signifies ‘blood’ or human nature and the ‘blue’ signifies the sky; the Creator, and that of divine nature, thus portraying Christ as the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures. Perhaps the best illustration of this is the well-known icon of the Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev painted between 1422 – 1477 (See Appendix, figure1). In his remarkable study, Gabriel Bunge presents us with a much-needed and long-awaited convincing interpretation of the Rublev masterpiece. We will need to explore some of the deeper elements of this icon, and in what may seem to be a digression, will become clear when we analyze the icon of the Transfiguration by Rublev’s teacher, Theophanes the Greek in chapter 4.

This icon has long been debated as to which figures represent the Persons of the Trinity. Bunge’s arguments are more than convincing and grounded in Johannine Pentecost<sup>37</sup> by inviting us to *re-discover* the spiritual movement of the time known as “hesychasm”<sup>38</sup> that provides the backdrop of the inspiration of its creation at the St. Sergius Monastery in Radonezh. At his baptism, the priest predicted that St. Sergius (1313-1392) would become a great elder and vessel of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> St. Sergius’ disciple, St. Nikon, commissioned this icon for the monastery which was dedicated to the Holy Trinity in order to reflect the illumined and deified life of the saint. The genius of Rublev was to create a depiction of the Trinity where the Holy Spirit “emerges from the shadows—equal to the Father and the Son—at Pentecost.”<sup>40</sup> Based on the Johannine account, the icon mirrors the theology of the Church and the importance of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit

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<sup>34</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, [...], p. 144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> C.f. Gabriel Bunge. *The Rublev Trinity*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75. Hesychasm comes from *hesychia* (silence); a practice of inward stillness and continual prayer with a goal of attaining union with God and the vision of divine Light., or *theosis*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

for man's deification and salvation. "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever. Even the spirit of truth: whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him: for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." (John 14:16-17). Therefore, this passage makes it clear that the Spirit may be ever-present in the world, but not everyone will necessarily acquire it. Acquisition requires investment.

Bunge convincingly interprets that the middle figure is that of Christ—the details of which are beyond the scope of this essay. If we observe the downwardly expanding (i.e. emptying) shape of Christ's blue garment which also points to the vessel containing the head of the sacrificed calf, this is clearly a depiction of Christ's kenosis. The Holy Spirit (the figure on the right) also points to this vessel and the "self-offering of the Son".<sup>41</sup> The free right arm of Christ and the free left arm of the Holy Spirit could be an allusion to the two "hands" of God following the teaching of the Fathers (Irenaeus).<sup>42</sup>

A fascinating explanation is also provided by Bunge on the middle angel representing Christ. Apparently, the restoration of the icon in the twentieth century revealed that the original icon depicted a right hand that was closed (fisted) and only one finger (the index finger) pointed over the chalice and past it, to the Holy Spirit<sup>43</sup> emphasizing the Holy Spirit as the vehicle for man's salvation. The addition of the second finger making it look more like a blessing began even by the copyists in the fifteenth century who misinterpreted the icon as—from left to right—Spirit, Father, Son. This error is also made by Evdokimov—following the misinterpretation by others—placing the central figure as the Person of the Father which provides a very different interpretation of the icon.<sup>44</sup>

Through the good relations between Russia and the Mother Church of Byzantium<sup>45</sup> it was not an accident that hesychasm reached Russia with the influence of St. Gregory Palamas on the revival of the mystical movement. This was also noted by Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882-1937), "In the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>44</sup> Paul, EVDOKIMOV. *The Art of the Icon: A theology of Beauty*, Oakwood Publications, Redondo Beach, California, 1990, p. 248-249.

<sup>45</sup> C.f. Gabriel Bunge. *The Rublev Trinity*, [...], p. 75.



fourteenth century, for a variety of reasons, the dogma of the Trinity became the special object of Ecumenical attention, and the man who completed this work, crowning the whole of the medieval epoch, was “the worshipper of the most Holy Trinity...St. Sergius of Radonezh.”<sup>46</sup> We should also note that during the amazing life of this saintly hermit, Russia was being devastated by the Mongolian invasions but the hesychastic monks of St. Sergius remained a beacon of light. Ouspensky writes, “The horrifying Tartars curbed the creative spirit of the Russian people but they did not break it”<sup>47</sup> The Taboric radiance of this monastery dedicated appropriately to the Holy Trinity in the dense of the woods of Radonezh was enough to spark all of Russia and for Rublev, the creation of this masterpiece.

The importance of the Trinitarian mystery to St. Sergius and the Light received through the Holy Spirit is also mentioned by Evdokimov, “his whole life was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This divine mystery was the object of his endless contemplation; it flowed into him and turned him into incarnated peace, a peace which very visibly radiated from him for everyone... [he] is the very expression of the Trinitarian mystery, of its Light and its Unity.”<sup>48</sup>

To conclude, the hesychast tradition and the idea of the deification of man was present in both Greece and Russia and the Taboric Light of the Transfiguration was at the *heart* of Eastern Christian mystical spirituality; bearing witness that authentic spirituality could only be possible through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Mantzaridis writes that it is through the human nature of Christ that man can now be deified and that he “partakes of this gift through the Holy Spirit...The Spirit does not actually bring about man’s deliverance but gives him access to the regenerative and divine work of Christ that has been accomplished once for all.”<sup>49</sup>

The Incarnation of God was always understood by the early Church as the gateway to man’s ultimate destiny of divinity which can be obtained in *this* life, “Whereby are given unto us exceedingly great and precious promises: that by these, ye might be *partakers*”<sup>50</sup> [my emphasis]

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<sup>46</sup> Pavel FLORENSKY. *Iconostasis*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000, p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> Leonid OUSPENSKY. *Theology of the Icon*, Volume II, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992, p. 254.

<sup>48</sup> Paul, EVDOKIMOV. *The Art of the Icon: A theology of Beauty*, [...], p. 244-245.

<sup>49</sup> Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Eastern Christianity interprets the word ‘partakers’ to mean in the uncreated energies of God, not His essence, in order to maintain the ontological distinction between the natures of God and man.

of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” (2 Peter 1:4).

## 2.2 The Incarnation

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is intricately linked to the Transfiguration as well as to the Second Coming where all things will be fulfilled. Fr. John Romanides provides us with insight into the possibility of man to acquire the Light of God and to be transfigured. As a starting point he places the Incarnation at the *center* of this mystery. When a person reaches a state of deification (theosis), he “relives all the stages of revelation (Transfiguration, Pentecost) .... [and] then he experientially sees for himself that Orthodox theology has a cyclical character and that the cycle revolves around the Incarnation.”<sup>51</sup> Around this center is what Fr. John alludes that there is no delusion, and it is where man finds authentic spirituality, “You cannot see matters correctly unless you consider this center. When you reach this core during an experience of theosis and reach that point where all truth is revealed, you cannot be deceived by anything relating to God, the faith, and worship.”<sup>52</sup>

If we read *The Incarnation*, by St. Athanasius, with this *center* in mind, we can see very clearly the great humility and kenosis of God that we are called to reciprocate and the cosmic revelations that are revealed to man when he enters this mystery,

Now, if they ask, why then did He not appear by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instrument, as the sun, or moon, or stars, or fire, or air, instead of man merely? Let them know that the Lord came not to make a display, but to heal and teach those who were suffering. For the way for one aiming at display would be, just to appear, and to *dazzle* [my emphasis] the beholders; but for one seeking to heal and teach the way, is not simply to sojourn here, but to give himself to the aid of those in want, and to appear as they who need him can bear it; that he may not, by exceeding the requirements of the sufferers, trouble the very persons that need him, rendering God's appearance useless to them.<sup>53</sup>

Athanasius also makes it clear that the manner of His birth was not what we would expect of a prophet, for the prophets of the past were ‘hidden’, “But of Christ’s humble birth the witness was

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<sup>51</sup> John ROMANIDES. *Patristic Theology*, Simpsonville, SC, Uncut Mountain Press, 2008, p. 221.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Sant ATHANASIUS. *The Incarnation*, [...], 43:1.

not man, but a star in that heaven whence He was descending”<sup>54</sup> thus He comes as the Master of the cosmos who announced by a star that He Himself fashioned, shows Himself to be the Ruler of all creation. He does not come already in adult form or some other supernatural form to “dazzle” man uselessly with a cosmic spectacle, but He hid the fullness of His Majesty and power in the form of a babe, so man can be intrigued by this and move towards his deification. From birth, Christ assumes the full spectrum of human nature; the joys and sufferings, in order for man to discover His Majesty by climbing the ‘high mountain’ of Tabor and witnessing the hidden joy of the eternal dance of the cosmos since the day of His unimaginable birth; He who comingled irreversibly His nature with ours.

Through His life as a ‘perfect example’ Christ comforted man by giving him great hope of his own potentialities. This is *useful* to him, but had He dazzled man in a spectacle, man would remain in a state similar to that of the Old Testament, searching for the elusive God. He ‘dazzled’ therefore, only those three Apostles on Mount Tabor so they can understand that His death was voluntary, but when the ‘spectacle’ was over, He was once again, the close, personal, gentle God, who loved them dearly. Archmandrite Vasileios presents us with additional insight, “He does not come to advertise the wealth of His divinity and reveal our worthlessness and poverty. Instead, He becomes poor...so that by His poverty we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).”<sup>55</sup>

In a similar way by which His ‘hidden’ Majesty was revealed at His birth in humility, it was also ‘hidden’ while He hung on the Cross which could have been another opportunity for him to “dazzle” and display the same power he showed to the three Apostles on Tabor. Yet again, His Majesty was reserved only for the humble who could ‘see’, “From the sixth hour [noon] there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth [3 pm] hour.” (Matt. 27:45). Citing St. Nicodemos, St. Nectarios of Aegina explained that “several laws of nature were altered during this supernatural eclipse”<sup>56</sup> where during this vernal equinox, the “moon had to have travelled—in an instant—the distance that would normally take it twelve hours.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, while the Jews

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 35:8.

<sup>55</sup> Archmandrite VASILEIOS. “*The Light of Christ Shines Upon All*” Through All the Saints, Montréal, Québec, Alexander Press, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> C.f. NECTARIOS of Aegina. *Saint Nectarios the Wonderworker: Bishop of Pentapolis*, Roskoe, New York, Saint Nectarios Monastery Publications, 2006, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

challenged Him to come down from the Cross, they failed to recognize this other miracle of cosmic proportions which revealed Him to be the Ruler of this same cosmos.

In the first Christmas celebration, man rejoices in his comingling with God, where now he can be healed gradually and be *transfigured* towards the Light of God to rediscover his lost image.

Thus, when we celebrate Christmas, we are also celebrating the hope of our eventual transfiguration. Separated from the mystery of the Incarnation, the Transfiguration cannot be properly understood. Today, the secular celebration of Christmas is, sadly, far removed from this understanding.

The birth of Christ according to Luke 2: 7-38 is filled with hints of transfiguration experiences. Firstly, similar to the fear experienced by the apostles on Mount Tabor, the shepherds had the same experience, “the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord *shone* [my emphasis] round them: and they were so afraid.” (Luke 2: 9) and when they found the manger and the babe in swaddling clothes, they recognized the same glory of the Lord according to the sign that was given to them (Luke 2: 12) and Joseph and Mary were also transfigured and “wondered at those things which were told them concerning this child.” (Luke 2:17). More explicitly, is the case of the “devout” man Simeon (Luke 2:25) where the “Holy Ghost was upon him” and his eyes were transfigured to recognize his long-awaited “consolation of Israel”, and lastly, the long-since widowed “prophetess” Anna, (Luke 2:36-37) who climbed the “high mountain” at 84 years old by “serving God with fastings and prayers night and day...gave thanks likewise unto the Lord and spake of Him to all them that looked for redemption.”

Given the dynamism of all these events, this allows us to interpret Matthew’s passage in regards to Joseph and Mary correctly, “Then Joseph being raised from *sleep* [my emphasis] did as the angel of the Lord had bidden, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son [my emphasis] ...” (Matthew 1:24-25). The same ‘sleep’ was also mentioned which befell the apostles on Mount Tabor, and just as concretely as the transfiguration of the Apostles’ eyes, Joseph’s visitation by the angel—the same as that experienced by the shepherds—was just as real in order for him to take a pregnant woman as his wife. Therefore, the above underlined scriptural passage means that despite Joseph’s ‘transfiguration’ experience during this ‘sleep’, he still did not fully grasp the magnitude, the

extraordinary cosmic marvel of Christ's birth until He was born, where the marvelous events that took place (as we outlined above) afforded him an even more profound *knowledge* of who the Mother of this child was and her *grandeur*—where after Christ's birth, he came to *know* her. We will return to the idea of 'sleep' later.

Western Christians unfortunately misinterpret this passage as meaning that Joseph and Mary had other children, and they mistranslate the original Greek passage as “but had no *marital relations* [my emphasis] with her until she had borne a son”<sup>58</sup>, the same mistranslation they provide after Christ's birth, “And the child's *father* [my emphasis] and mother were amazed at what was being said about him” (Luke 2:33) in order to further emphasize their so-called ‘marital relations’ subsequent to Christ's birth, whereas the original Greek, does not say “father and mother” but “Joseph and his mother” (Καὶ ἦν Ἰωσήφ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ). This Western Christian refusal to honor the virginity of the Mother of God, is largely due to their removal from the traditional understanding of the Transfiguration event and the possibility for man to be indeed deified.

As we will see in Chapter 3, according to St. Maximus, man acts as a mediator before all of creation and God. The first of these mediations is man's surpassing between male and female where man moves beyond the differentiation of the sexes. In their worldly view of sexuality, Westerners misinterpret this above passage and consequently lose the opportunity towards *knowing* her as did Joseph, through the grace that is given by an authentic *transfiguring* experience.

### 2.3 Image and Likeness

*And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen 1:26).*

Perhaps the most commented verses in the Old Testament are about man's creation and is the foundation of Christian anthropology. For the Fathers of the early Church, their view of the metaphysics of the ‘image’ is very much attached to their cosmology and the ordered fashion of creation. A broader review of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay, but we will review some key patristic texts leading into Chapter 4 on the deification of man that form the basis for

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<sup>58</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New York, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 10 NT.

the mystical spirituality of the Eastern Christian Church. The early Christian view on the image and likeness of man and consequently the ability of man to be deified will form the basis of the theology behind the vision of the Light of God and the mysticism of contemplative prayer of the Hesychast Tradition.

The treatise by the great mystic St. Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man”<sup>59</sup> which follows the Hexaëmeron of his brother, St. Basil the Great, solves the mind-body mystery and the ‘problem of consciousness’ by elaborating on the body’s marvellous functional abilities as an *instrument* for the use of reason where the *nous* produces the music of reason by means of our “instrumental construction.”<sup>60</sup> Contrary to the platonic view—or that of metempsychosis—that the body strives for release, St. Gregory Palamas builds on Gregory of Nyssa and also confirms that the body and soul have such a harmonious attachment, that the body never wishes to leave it.<sup>61</sup> This ability of man to reason in the image of God, is for Gregory of Nyssa, the purpose why man was created last after the rest of creation so that the “ruler should [not] appear before the subjects of his rule; but [only] when his dominion was prepared...that by his enjoyment he might have knowledge of the Giver, and by the majesty of the things he saw might trace out that power of the Maker which is beyond speech and language.”<sup>62</sup>

St. Gregory further explains that the image is something we possess by virtue of our creation and we are born in the image of God. As for likeness, however, he connects this to the freedom of man to strive to complete the likeness on his own in order to be worthy of the grand honour of his dominion over the rest of creation.<sup>63</sup> St. Irenaeus provides us with further clarity to this mystery by virtue of the Incarnation. For him, Jesus Himself is the image of God that man was created in, and therefore prior to the Incarnation, the image was invisible and for this reason man

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<sup>59</sup> C.f. Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Making of Man*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5 (Philip Schaff, editor), Grand Rapids, Michigan, W.M.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p. 387.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 395 (IX-X).

<sup>61</sup> C.f. Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> C.f. Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Making of Man*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, [...], p. 390.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

gradually lost his likeness but when the word was made flesh, he confirmed both the image and the likeness.<sup>64</sup>

This ability of man to be able to ponder the ‘science’ of the created world, Gregory attributes to the foundation of his created being which is made up of “the instincts of a two-fold organization, blending the Divine with the earthly, that by means of both he may be naturally and properly disposed to each enjoyment, enjoying God by the means of his more divine nature, and the good things of earth by the sense that is akin to them.”<sup>65</sup> The instincts of the mind are, however, “invisible” and part of the ‘divine’ aspect of man’s two-fold nature. He thus states that if God is incomprehensible, then the ‘mind’ or image of God in man is also incomprehensible. If this mind then sustains the beauty of this image then it “has the like power, insofar as it is an image of the image...”<sup>66</sup> Here again, Gregory is referring to the maintenance and augmentation of the likeness in the image which is man’s responsibility by exercising his freewill.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Marius Victorinus (4<sup>th</sup> cc) in speaking against the Arians, states that man has been created “according” to this image and by the fact that the Son is the image of God, man is the “image of the image”<sup>68</sup>, that is, by virtue of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son.<sup>69</sup>

On a functional level, St. Gregory of Nyssa explains that God “made human nature participate in all good; for if the Deity is the fulness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good.”<sup>70</sup> This is man’s elevated inherent nature that gives him dominion over the rest of creation, and as we’ll see later, allows him to stand as a mediator between God and all of creation and enables him to freely move towards the vision of God’s Light and achieve deification (theosis).

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<sup>64</sup> C.f. St. Irenaeus. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament, Series I, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), Institute of Classical Christian Studies, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter Varsity Press, 2003, p. 31.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Making of Man*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, [...], p. 390.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.399.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357, *Treatise On Virginity*. Gregory expands here that it is man’s free act to avoid evil and remain in the likeness to God’s image.

<sup>68</sup> Marius Victorinus. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament, Series I, [...], p. 29.

<sup>69</sup> Origen first clarified that only Christ—the firstborn of all creation—is the only image of God and that man is made ‘in’ this image. C.f. Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *On the Making of Man*. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, [...], p. 405.

Therefore, the likeness to God points to man's ultimate destiny and to the high *cosmic* order of his being. Like Gregory, John of Damascus and John Chrysostom also remarked that the "dominion" of man was a reference to "our relationship with God and our being placed over the created order. It constitutes our royal state and is manifest in our possession of divine reason..."<sup>71</sup>

How can we in a practical way therefore, begin to discover the image of God in humanity? Vrame explains that the fathers of the Church never provided us with an exhaustive list of how to discover the image of God, as God is ultimately beyond any description but they provided us with six major characteristics that we can use to help us as follows: uniqueness, freedom, ecclesial relationship, growth, creativity, and love.<sup>72</sup>

### 2.3.1 Uniqueness

We are all created in one image of God, however, we nonetheless are distinct not only from anyone else alive, but from any other person who has ever lived, or will ever be born. We all have a unique part to play in the theatre of life, and the divine plan or Providence of God. As such, we all possess unique and unrepeatable qualities, never again to be moulded in exactly the same fashion by the hands of God. Fundamental to the theology of the Eastern Christian Church is the concept of the *person*. Just as each person of the Trinity is unique, each human being is unique, "As the person of Jesus Christ was both divine and human, the fathers saw communion with divinity as intrinsic to human nature."<sup>73</sup> What is also important here is that Eastern patristic sources also make a distinction that man only lost his likeness to God after the Fall but not his image<sup>74</sup>, therefore the possibility of restoring the likeness is indeed possible. Critical to this, is our use of the word *hypostasis*, the 'underlying stance' or personhood of an individual; the crux of who we really are; the ontological 'me', that can meet the Almighty God personally and at the same time can 'stand' in his humanity as a perfect image and mediator between God and all of the cosmos as we will see in Chapter 3.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament, Series I [...], p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> Anton VRAME. *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* [...], p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*



St. Athanasius' well-known phrase cited earlier about this potentiality of man, "For He was made man that we might be made God"<sup>75</sup> reflects man's progression to the likeness of God. For humanity, as such, is just an abstraction, but it is the *person* that hypostasizes the essence of humanity to form a being that expresses a unique and beautiful part of humanity. Being made in His image, we encounter God as a *person*, not some idea or abstraction. Lossky articulates this well, "God is not the object of a science...The theologian does not search for God as a man seeks an object; he is seized by Him as one is seized by a person."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, one unique person (man) is meeting one unique God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Metropolitan Hierotheos explains that today there are a lot of different systems and teachings that distort this understanding, making man a "simple biological monad, not seeing him as a person."<sup>77</sup> Quoting St. John Chrysostom, Hierotheos goes on, "For a man is not simply one who has a man's hands and feet, nor one who is merely rational, but one who practices devotion and virtue with confidence."<sup>78</sup> Thus the implications for us are revealed in the possibility that man can rise above the physical and the rational and believe that he actually can unite with God as a beloved *person* created in His image, which takes *courage* not just "confidence" to acknowledge his uniqueness and aspire to the likeness of His Creator. Hierotheos implies that this confidence comes from within and without, "in order to be called a man [he] must also have the Holy Spirit within...Thus a living and real man is one who is "favoured" with the grace of God. Otherwise, he is a man dead to God and swayed by various passions, one is like the animals."<sup>79</sup> St. Paul provides us with perhaps the most insight on this correlation between man and his person, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). Mirrors at that time were not as good as today therefore reflecting a 'dim' image of the real person, but when a person is deified, he will see God 'face to face' and encounter Him as a God-person, when he is re-made in the likeness of God and stands before Him as a deified image of his Archetype.

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<sup>75</sup> Op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989, p.27.

<sup>77</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, HIEROTHEOS. *The Person in the Orthodox Tradition*, Levadia, Greece, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1998, p. 68.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

In the pantheism of Hinduism, the idea of Nirvana to escape the cycle of metempsychosis (reincarnation) and achieve final release is foreign to the Eastern Christian view where a unique *person* could not be reincarnated without consciousness as a tree, for example, and debase his personhood. The human person is therefore a beloved concrete hypostatic reality of his Creator born to meet Him ‘face to face’ by exercising the discernible and unrepeatable qualities of his person.

Prior to St. Basil the Great the ‘essence’ was identified with the ‘hypostasis’ but he made a distinction between the two and identified the hypostasis with the *person* when writing against the heresy of Sabellianism<sup>80</sup>, “For merely to enumerate the differences of Persons is insufficient; we must confess each Person to have a natural existence in real hypostasis.”<sup>81</sup> The saints as identifiable persons are examples of this. They each attained spiritual heights towards the likeness of God, but they each had a unique and magnificent life specific only to them that no other saint can repeat. And for this reason, each icon must indicate the name of the particular saint to crystallize their unique person.

Today, this early Christian ‘person-centered’ view has been distorted by many ‘self-centered’ systems which really misinterpret the ‘personality’ to be the person in some abstract way.<sup>82</sup> This is reflected in Western Christianity’s way of thinking geared towards the *discovery of gifts* so as to be of “use” to their community. This utilitarian attitude is foreign to the early Christian Church and Eastern Christianity whose focus is salvation not utility; where each member is an equal part of the Body of Christ. Therefore, the emphasis should not be on “discovering *my* gifts” but rather, doing God’s *Will*. This re-direction allows us to discover our unique identity in Christ, and consequently the image of God in us. Doing God’s Will while using potentially our gifts is what brings us to discover our uniqueness and God’s individual and erotic love for us. We can be so busy trying to discover our self-centered gifts that we do not have the attentiveness or spiritual eyes to perform God’s Will. This self-absorbed focus is what impedes our progress

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<sup>80</sup> Sabellios taught that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were manifested as three different outward ‘masks’ rather than three distinct ‘persons’ or ‘hypostases’.

<sup>81</sup> St. Basil the Great, Letter 210, Verse 5. C.f. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202210.htm> (page consulted on 2018-11-25)

<sup>82</sup> C.f. Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, HIEROTHEOS. *The Person in the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 78.

towards transfiguration by not allowing us to respond to God's calling and down the dangerous pitfall of human pride.

The doctrine of deification being absent in Western theology leaves man wanting as he seeks to fulfill his ontological calling through utilitarian methodologies. The focus here is on the freedom of the ego or 'personality', not the person as a divine image of God through the grace he has received and whose mission it is to be deified and have eternal life. St. Paul is a paramount example of this. While on the way to Damascus, he was gifted with the vision of the Taboric Light. Already ahead of other Pharisees of his age and very 'gifted', he was granted additional gifts of discernment through his vision but for the purpose of performing God's Will so as to expand Christianity. Lest we forget, the same excellent Apostle tells us that all gifts will be abolished; all things that we play with; all our toys, will be abolished. For this reason, he calls us to mature beyond childhood and learn how to love—the only thing that brings life. (1 Cor 13:1-13).

Archmandrite Vasileios also provides us with some profound words. He says that our only job is to "die in God"<sup>83</sup>, that is, to be deified, and then all other things could be done freely without attachment. He elaborates on man's insatiable desire for personal accomplishments and worldly praise, "When you build to build, you are enlarging your tomb. When you write in order to write, you are weaving your shroud."<sup>84</sup> Today, life inspiration is replaced by death addiction. Modern man is consumed by his devices and has made a God out of them. Instead of "dying in God", he 'dies in addictions' of every sort precisely because he is unaware of the gain to be had by being transfigured in love.

Man searches for happiness in any way we can define it, but the truth, is that life is full of tragedy, pain, and suffering. Discovering God's unique Will for our life is what brings ultimate fulfillment and although tragedies may come, we have God's unwavering love to comfort us knowing we are unique and indispensable servants of His Holy Will and working towards the ultimate fulfillment of His Providence, by climbing the 'high mountain' towards our transfiguration. The challenge is having the *freedom* of humility to accept God's Will.

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<sup>83</sup> Archmandrite VASILEIOS. *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* [...], p 120.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

### 2.3.2 Freedom

The Eastern Christian model of true freedom has nothing to do with what contemporary society would interpret it to be. The concept of reality is closely linked to freedom. As we mentioned above, focusing on the ‘personality’ and not the ‘person’ post-modern society tells us that freedom is your *right to be* whoever you choose and create any ‘reality’ you choose. Under this model, the starting point will therefore be this chosen reality. Is this true freedom or captivity to a chosen boundary? Or let us rather ask the question, can there be true freedom within a multi-reality context, and can the person discover their true uniqueness in this fashion?

The long history of Christian apostolic tradition in the Eastern Church has proven that only one reality is possible—one Truth—where one can be wholly free; where one can surpass the boundaries of human wisdom and be enlightened to no end; to live beyond man-made boundaries and enter into the reality where the saints of this earth commune freely by, and within, the divine grace of the uncreated energies of God; boundless unending glory in *this* life. What worldly glory can entice those who soar freely in the heavens while still in this world to aspire to a lesser reality?

Authentic reality *is* therefore, as God *is*, and revealed to those who do not share in it by the likeness of the saints so they can hope to aspire to it. Authentic freedom can only be experienced in the confines of an authentic reality, and authentic freedom is grounded in Truth, and not just truth but *wholeness* of Truth, otherwise it is not authentic freedom but imprisonment to some deluded or substandard idea of reality because, fundamentally, there can only be one authentic reality by definition. St. Gregory of Nyssa says that the darkness in man arises, “...from his own free act in ceasing to see. Again, a man in building a house for himself may omit to make in it any way of entrance for the light; he will necessarily be in darkness, though he cuts himself off from the light voluntarily.”<sup>85</sup>

By revisiting the concept of the person, the Trinity is a model of distinct yet consubstantial persons, but it is in *relation* to each other that each is a distinct person. Always in agreement they *give up* their freedom to *each other* and this way always act with total love and unison. Not for the sake of being united per se, but this is the way true love exists and operates. True freedom is

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<sup>85</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. *On Virginity*. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, [...], p. 357.

therefore found not in *thymself* but through the *other* in a context of an authentic reality without any possible contradiction. Love therefore implies a process of reciprocation to allow for an exchange. If there is only one, there can be no exchange and thus, no love. The Eucharistic members of the Church are therefore united as free persons in a reality that forms the Body of Christ.

It is very difficult for us to fathom and live by the model of the Holy Trinity, as did St. Sergius, but today we are in desperate need of it, as mankind is faced with imminent ecological and social disaster. Our hope is that having been imbued with the image of God, we can each come to know and reflect upon this model image, and then move towards its likeness, by “giving up” our freedom for the sake of love, for the sake of the ‘other’, and for the sake of the world. In this way, we enter into a reality where we begin to discover the depth of our unique person, our true identity, and then we can truly be “free” to enjoy the divine graces of God. We are so accustomed, or rather, conditioned to think of freedom *from* others or away from others and not freedom *for* the other. Vrame calls it a “freedom of separation...which ultimately becomes a freedom of alienation.”<sup>86</sup> This unique model grounded in a relationship of love and personhood works in a reverse movement; moving towards the “other” in a self-emptying *kenotic* movement, we move towards ourselves and God. This reverse kenotic movement of the soul that is truly *free* is described by Clément, “A truly inspired intuition: to evoke God not in the language of fullness but in that of emptiness. Fullness suggests riches, abundance, [and] power. Self-emptying ... expresses the entire mystery of love. God moves towards humanity in a reverse movement: it is not an over-full God, who would overwhelm humanity, but a God “emptied” and awaiting our response of love.”<sup>87</sup>

The world strives for independence and not interdependence. The Fathers use the word “*perihoreseis*” or “interpenetration” to describe the Trinity. St. Basil instructs us not to contemplate God in quantity such as the ‘three and the one’ but rather to contemplate the *quality* of God as His divine simplicity is not divisible by numbers. He instructs us rather to think of the rainbow if we want to think about God and true freedom. We cannot tell where one color ends and the other begins. They are one light but multiple interpenetrating colors. In the same respect,

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<sup>86</sup> Anton VRAME. *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* [...], p. 70.

<sup>87</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT. *You are Peter: An Orthodox Theologian’s Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy*, [...], p. 104.

we share this exact image: Although God gave us freewill and made us unique beings, we are nonetheless by nature, part of the collective *human* rainbow, and consequently, in the one and true image of God. We are therefore bound by our common humanity and can only discover freedom and consequently, the image of God in communion with each other. The other therefore, acts as a mirror, where together we can discover our common colors made in the image of God.

### 2.3.3 Ecclesial Relationship

The Eastern Christian Church's belief is that the church on earth is an extension of the church in Heaven and not just a symbol. This ecclesiology is paramount in enabling the person to discover their *uniqueness* by being truly *free*, and this only by participation in the sacramental Body of Christ, and through our *ecclesial relationship* and unity with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, we move closer to discovering our image and likeness. The person relating to another person is how energy is transmitted. In each other, we see the image of Christ, and surpass the fault line from this world to the other, not as individuals but as members of the same Body partaking in Holy Communion. Vrame states, "In our earthly existence, the Orthodox Tradition identifies the locus of communion as the Church...Through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, we are offered the opportunity to participate in that divine mode of existence."<sup>88</sup>

Through the face of the other we find our own unique identity and discover our own unique person created in the image of God. When we re-discover our unique 'personhood'—the high honour we have been given by God, we realize that the image that we are created in, implies multiplicity, and implies the other. We then acknowledge the necessity of our collective sacramental unity if we are to move towards ourselves, the other and God's likeness. The locus or meeting place where we can come together to relate to one another is the Church for which Christ is the Head and where we travel together to the Kingdom of God during the Divine Liturgy. St. Gregory Palamas emphasized that the two principle sacraments that bring salvation to man is baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Through baptism, the image of man is renewed in Christ, and then the Holy Eucharist brings about his advance towards the likeness and his full union with Christ. For this reason, the Divine Liturgy cannot be celebrated alone as it presupposes a unity in multitude moving together towards the likeness of God. In St. Gregory's

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<sup>88</sup> Anton VRAME. *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* [...], p. 73.

own words, “Every love finds fulfillment through unity, and starts from likeness. The popular adage “Like attracts like” is an ancient one.””<sup>89</sup>

The Transfiguration experience is fundamental to the eucharistic experience where we are called to bear witness to the joy and the Taboric light as one Body in Christ. We pray not only personally and contemplate the Word of God, but also as a community, where after receiving Holy Communion, we sing, “we have seen the true light”. Archmandrite Vasileios not only makes a direct connection between the experience of liturgical light and the Transfiguration but to its authenticity and our responsibility as Christians to take this light and share it with the world out of love, “When man comes down from the *mountain* [my emphasis] of his experience of the Liturgy, of participation in that which truly exists, he goes about his business in the created world in a different way. He does his service in time differently.”<sup>90</sup>

#### 2.3.4 Growth/Education

As human ‘persons’ we are therefore dynamic growing beings and our “vocation...is to grow from God’s image towards God-likeness. Growth and progress are not only possible but essential to human existence.”<sup>91</sup> It is therefore growth in personhood aimed at achieving God-likeness where a person becomes ‘perfect’ or a ‘whole person’. St. Athanasius said that, ‘God became man so that man can become God’ (by grace). St. Irenaeus challenges us, however, by asking the question, “How could you be God when you have not yet become human?” That is, we must rediscover the image of God inside us first before we aspire to grow to the likeness.

The educative process began with Adam and Eve. In Genesis (18-23), after God created Adam and He called every creature to him to be named, Adam did not find his equal; but it was only when God brought Eve to him, that he recognized his own image in her. By creating the animals before Eve, it was God’s way of educating Adam, to recognize as in a mirror, his own image and aspire to God’s likeness.

St. Paul provides words of hope for our fallen humanity, “For the perfecting of the saints...unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12-4:13). As

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<sup>89</sup> St. Gregory PALAMAS. Homily fifty-six, *The Homilies*, Waymart, PA, Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009, p. 464.

<sup>90</sup> Archmandrite VASILEIOS. *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* [...], p. 79.

<sup>91</sup> Anton VRAME. *The Educating Icon: Teaching Wisdom and Holiness in the Orthodox Way* [...], p. 71.

we will describe later in the icon of the Transfiguration (see Appendix II, figure 2) we see the perfection in likeness in the prophets staring at Christ ‘face to face’ as opposed to the Apostles, who have not attained the full measure and are in need of growth. What is important to note here from the words of St. Paul is that even the saints are growing continuously through God’s transfiguring Light.

### 2.3.5 Creativity

Although we have the ability to create in God’s likeness, this ability does not extend to creating *ex nihilo*. Our artistic capacity however, reflects somewhat the divine ability to create out of nothing because, we start with an abstract idea and can realize this idea in some form. Whatever man discovers through his ability to create is an opportunity to approach and marvel at God’s unlimited love, but man does not innovate responsibly to emulate God’s creative and sustaining forces, but rather he is motivated by other destructive forces. As man moves away from the inherent sacredness of creativity, he also loses the ability to create in sacred fashion.

Being in God’s image, our ability to be creative is a basic capacity of man in order to be joyful in our creative emulation of God and aspire to His likeness. St. Maximus the Confessor writes, “God, full beyond all fullness, brought creatures into being not because He had need of anything, but so that they might participate in Him in proportion to their capacity and that He Himself might rejoice in His works (c.f. Ps. 104 : 31), through seeing them joyful and ever filled to overflowing with His inexhaustible gifts.”<sup>92</sup> God was under no necessity to create man but He gave us the gift of the vision of Light so that we may experience joy and love in our ability *to be* and to participate in God. St. Gregory of Nyssa provides us with perhaps the best expression for the purpose of man’s creation by God,

For needful it was that neither His light should be unseen, nor His glory without witness, nor His goodness unenjoyed, nor that any other quality observed in the Divine nature should in any case lie idle, with none to share it or enjoy it. If therefore, man, comes to his birth upon these conditions, namely to be a partaker of the good things in God, necessarily he is framed of such a kind as to be adapted to the participation of such good.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes II*, London, England, Faber and Faber, 1984, p. 90.

<sup>93</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa. *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5*, [...], p. 478.



Payne also explains that man was created as a simple act of charity out of the abundance of God's love.<sup>94</sup> That is, in His kenotic charity He created man for the simple reason that someone, other than Himself, can be a witness to the perfect image of love. It then follows that anything that man creates that is outside of a sacred theocentric vision becomes an obstacle to the experience of the fullness of joy and love, as it becomes a warped likeness to divine creativity.

Clément says in regard to pure art, that it has been pushed to the “limits of subjectivity and folly”<sup>95</sup> which is a reflection of man's inability to transcend our Modernity. Similarly, Sherrard sets ‘the sacred’ as the foundation for creativity and true art which, “presupposes a metaphysical view of the universe... [and] when this vision is lost, art ceases to have a spiritual or sacred content.”<sup>96</sup> Rather the artist is motivated by how they “see themselves and the world they live in as realities that exist in their own right apart from and independent of God.”<sup>97</sup> This distorted vision is why we innovate and create in irresponsible ways as reflections of our anthropocentric inner vision where man is free to create destructively and unchecked. Our level of sophistication is such that a simple signature is all that is required to provide value to otherwise empty vulgar images.

The downward concave arches in Byzantine style churches is reflective of an art that seeks to transcend to the sacred and be deified through all endeavors. This style emphasizes a ‘humility’ before God rather than temples that reach to the sky—something we see in gothic style architecture, for example. The “Great Church” of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) is an example of ‘sacred’ art and space, and “the best-known and probably the most influential Byzantine church.”<sup>98</sup> Ousterhout begins his essay by stating that the functionalism of modern architecture based on the “tenets of Modernism” requires firstly that the modern viewer undergoes “deprogramming”<sup>99</sup> in order to arrive at a different perspective beyond mere functionality. The design of Hagia Sophia is such that the natural light enters to follow the Light of the Divine

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<sup>94</sup> C.f. Robert PAYNE. *The Holy Fire*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980, p. 146.

<sup>95</sup> Olivier CLÉMENT. *You are Peter: An Orthodox Theologian's Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy* [...], p. 98.

<sup>96</sup> Philip SHERRARD. *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Ipswich, U.K., Golgonooza Press, 1990, p. 33.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Robert OUSTERHOUT. *The Holy Space: Architecture and the Liturgy* in Linda SAFRAN. *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998, p. 82.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Liturgy and the “longitudinal organization [reflects the] ... nature of the ceremony”<sup>100</sup> Hagia Sophia has been labelled as a ‘wonder of man’ and an example of what man can accomplish in partnership with God to discover the sacred in God.

The importance of the Transfiguring Taboric Light in this respect cannot be underemphasized. While man is continuously ‘perfected in his sainthood’ according to St. Paul, he will create according to the perfecting Light that has become part of him and in harmony with nature; not in opposition and in destruction of it. Our lack of respect towards the ‘sacred’ has created our current ecological and social crises. As we mentioned above, modern man is in desperate need of a spirituality and a vision that can reverse our situation. The quest for the vision of the Taboric Light can provide man with an alternate experience and vision for the world whereby he can transcend his ‘freedom’ in modernity and be truly ‘free’ to create in God’s likeness. The deification of man (theosis) is precisely this quest, for which Sherrard dedicates a whole chapter in order to emphasize that man must be transfigured in order to create responsibly.<sup>101</sup>

### 2.3.6 Love

As we mentioned earlier, the freedom and liberation of man will allow him to find his person; liberate him from captivity of hatred and allow him to love as God loves; free him from bigotry, separation and distinctions, but unite the other to himself out of love for our common colors. Our current state of human migration, abuse, politically justified exterminations and misapplied resources is evidence of a country-centered focus, while those who love, wait in agony and hope for leaders who have even a slight sense of love and inclusiveness.

The Eastern Christian model of love is not the same as the romanticized model of contemporary society. The proverbial, “for it is better to have loved, than to have never loved at all, is sadly, rarely said about God Who *is* love (1 John 4:16). The verse that follows this one is a direct link that the goal of man is to be transfigured to His perfection, “Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he *is*, so *are* we in this world.” (1 John 4:17). In *this* world, therefore we move towards God’s Light with hope of *being* in the likeness of God to become deified as an embodiment of love. Even a small honest movement towards

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>101</sup> Philip SHERRARD. *The Sacred in Life and Art*, [...], Chapter 7, The Art of Transfiguration, p. 85.

God can lead man to a glimpse of his potentiality towards a transfigured love before leaving this world; to taste even a small drop of His boundless and personal love; to have some hope of restoring his humanity. As Christians, now more than ever, we need to come together in a common denominator of love. The Taboric Light could serve as this commonality, where we can realize the potentialities of love in the matrix of our image and grow and create towards the likeness of our Archetype and offer it to the whole world. Up until the day of judgment, St. John says it is never too late.

## CHAPTER 3: THE MOTION OF MAN TOWARDS GOD

### 3.1 Deification in the Eastern Christian Church

*“Il y a qu’une tristesse, c’est de n’être pas des saints.”*

*-Léon Bloy, La Femme Pauvre*

*“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”*

*-Leo Tolstoy*

*“If we fail to be deified, our whole life is a failure.”<sup>102</sup>*

*-Abbot George of Mount Athos*

Some of the greatest literary minds have expressed this idea in one way or another, but they are not to be misunderstood as referring to sainthood as some lofty abstraction without a mode of actuality, but rather, it revolves around an applied ‘scientific’ methodology that has been creating concrete empirical and obvious results for centuries in the ‘abode’ of Light; the realm where “the true worshipers are called” who “worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:23).

For Eastern Christianity the soliciting of grace for the purpose of recognizing the ‘image of the image’ of God within and achieving the ‘likeness’ of God is the basis of deification or union with God. As quoted earlier by Gregory of Nyssa, it is precisely this two-fold nature of our image, divine and human, that allows man to come to the full realization of his dominion and full

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<sup>102</sup> Archmandrite GEORGE. *The Deification as the Purpose of Man’s Life*, Mount Athos, Greece, Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios of Mount Athos, 1997, p. 52.

unity with Jesus Christ. We see this also in the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor who suggests that deification is the final perfect beatitude of man and fulfills the “incarnational scheme of “salvation” prepared for man already before his fall...”<sup>103</sup> Thunberg describes Maximus’ vision of this beatitude of man in three inter-related points: firstly, the image and likeness of God in man; secondly, his description of a “perfect liturgy”; and thirdly, in his theology of deification.<sup>104</sup>

On the first point (the likeness) Thunberg compares some similarities between Maximus and Diadochus of Photiki<sup>105</sup> who viewed the “likeness above the image”<sup>106</sup> implying a supernatural character of likeness to be realized in the practice of virtues. Maximus defines likeness to a “kind of imitation of God...a manifestation of the divine virtues...”<sup>107</sup>

On the second point (the perfect liturgy) this intriguing analogy of Maximus defines likeness on an existential level which is characterized by the freewill of the person to acquire the likeness of God through a spiritual process by *moving* towards God. For Maximus, motion is a central theme as an ontological “*reciprocity between God and man*.”<sup>108</sup> That is, man moves towards the personal God without a mixture of divine and human natures, where man’s movement is manifested through this reciprocity and only made possible because of the composite nature of man having been made in the image of the divine. It is this divine endowment that precisely gives him the ability to *move* towards the likeness. For Maximus, not only can man move beyond nature and time<sup>109</sup>, but beyond the existential, and this, for him, is mysticism proper.<sup>110</sup> As we

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<sup>103</sup> C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985, p. 60.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> A fifth-century monk and bishop best known for his “100 Chapters, *On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination*”. An English translation can be found in *The Philokalia*, Volume I, [...], p. 253. Diadochus was a great renown spiritual teacher and had a great influence on Sts. Maximus, John Climacus, and Symeon the New Theologian, including hesychastic mysticism in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by integrating hesychasm with biblical perspectives of history as the fall, redemption and future glory. C.f. John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, p. 25. He is also known in the West through the works of Julian Pomerius, “*On the Contemplative life*”.

<sup>106</sup> C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos*, [...], p. 61.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> From Maximus’ *Theological and Economic Centuries*, (Patr. Gr. 90, 1104) C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos*, p. 63.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

noted above, Gregory of Nyssa confirms the same mystical element of our ‘two-fold nature’ (i.e. divine and earthly) or what he calls “instincts” which afford man the possibility to aspire to the likeness of God. As we mentioned earlier, Lao Tzu reached the heights of instinct or “intuition” but the Christian anthropology and existentialism of St. Maximus takes man to a higher place of honour.

In the mysticism of Maximus, man is the *mediator* between God and all of creation (*Ambigua*, Patrologia Graeca 91, 1304D-1312B).<sup>111</sup> Being made in the image of God, he innately responds with an erotic love to the Eros of God and possesses powers far greater than an ability to acquire some esoteric transcendental experience, but by virtue of his stance as a mediator he has the ability to unite the five complementary extremes of the created order and become a perfect realization of the theandric dimension of the universe.<sup>112</sup> These mediations are: between the sexes, between Paradise and the Inhabited World, between Heaven and Earth, between the Intelligible and the Sensible, and between God and His Creation. Man becomes transfigured through these stages and stands in the Taboric Light as a unique and beloved person. In the words of Lossky, man’s ultimate destiny is perfection in God’s image, “Man’s perfection lies not in that which likens him to the rest of creation, but in that which distinguishes him from the cosmos and likens him to his Creator.”<sup>113</sup> We will outline briefly these five mediations below that man can realize as he climbs the ‘high mountain’.

St. Paul also tells us that deification is possible through Jesus as a mediator, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”<sup>114</sup> and it is through this ‘man’ that St. Maximus extends the possibility of mediation to man. We also see this notion in the thought of Maximus in his work on the Lord’s Prayer. Christ is the mediator for man to get to the Father and His Kingdom, and the “person who prays is by grace the son of His Father...[and] that those in heaven and those on earth may be united in one will.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> C.f. Panayiotis NELLAS. *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* [...], p. 211.

<sup>112</sup> C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985, p.80.

<sup>113</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, [...], p.119.

<sup>114</sup> 1 Tim 2:5.

<sup>115</sup> C.f. The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes II*, [...], p. 289. See the online version at <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/Philokalia.pdf> (page consulted on 2018-12-02).

### 3.1.1 First Mediation: Between the Sexes

For Maximus, the first stage is for man to move beyond the differentiation of the sexes. The masculine and feminine elements are not destined to disappear, only to be subsumed effectively under the principle (logos) of the common human nature” to a “more noble form of relationship between man and woman, a relationship *in* their common *logos* of human nature.”<sup>116</sup> He gives the example of Christ when the “Apostle says, that in Jesus Christ, there is ‘neither male nor female’”.<sup>117</sup> We are in great need of reform on this issue. On the one hand a negative view of sexuality which is directly related to problematic Latin theological issues has crippled man’s ability to transcend, and on the other, complete freedom in sexuality has had the same effect.

In Eastern Christianity’s view, sexuality is not something to be scorned but valued. Although there are differing views, in general, sexuality is a means by which man can learn how to love and transcend beyond the sexual. Instead, our contemporary society has turned it into an idol; something to be ridiculed, not cherished. Our freedom, as discussed previously is intrinsically tied to sexuality as man has a choice to move and exist in life-giving ways or in ways that bring spiritual death and consequently deludes man consciously and unconsciously that life is about coping rather than truly living. Nellas describes this new state of “mortality” of modern man as a life where, “There is now no grace...welling up naturally within him. Life continues only so long as death is postponed. That which exists now in the proper sense is death: “life” has been transmuted into “survival”.<sup>118</sup> If man could understand or see love and sexuality with a different vision, our divorce rate—and now just as alarming, our low marriage rate—could be transformed to not just coping, but transfiguring the relationship. Chrysavgis explains, “The martyrdom of marriage is not simply a sign of the “hardships” to be faced together; we usually create our own havoc and difficulties. Rather it is a symbol of the Cross and of the ascetic struggle to die constantly for the other person.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor*, [...], p. 82-83.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>118</sup> Panayiotis NELLAS. *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* [...], p. 47.

<sup>119</sup> John CHRYSSAVGIS. *Love, Sexuality, and the Sacrament of Marriage*, Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998, p. 34.

### **3.1.2 Second Mediation: Between Paradise and the Inhabited World**

Maximus combines here the idea of a physical terrestrial paradise with the “specific version of the idea of a paradise of virtues”<sup>120</sup> which is accomplished by living in a divine manner of living. Therefore, a “paradise of virtues” allows man to experience a “virtuous realization of paradise...[in] anticipation of the future life to be lived after the resurrection.”<sup>121</sup> He clarifies that this is not a “substitute for the visible paradise” but rather, a “manifestation” of it. Therefore, it is through ascetic discipline—that we will cover later—that man can transfigure into divine character and pass from a life of “mortality” to a life of paradise, here on earth.

### **3.1.3 Third Mediation: Between Heaven and Earth**

The first two mediations are more related to a physical and practical asceticism but this third mediation is an “intermediary stage in the contemplative ascent of the soul”<sup>122</sup> which is “carried out by Christ through His ascension into heaven in His earthly body, consubstantial with ours, thereby manifesting the essential unity of sensible nature beyond any separation.”<sup>123</sup> Maximus instructs us to not only seek Christ through the body, that is through bodily ascesis, but also through contemplation since Christ ascended as a whole person to His Father and now offers us the same possibility. This ascension he likens to “a kind of spiritual assimilation to the life of the angels” where man can now participate in a communion of the “eyes of Christ”<sup>124</sup> by describing this action as one “who eats of the ‘eyes of Christ’ as the one who is ‘capable of comprehending the visible creation in a spiritual way.’”<sup>125</sup> This is what is often described as the ‘All-seeing Eye’ or ‘Self-Seeing Eye’ that we will review later.

### **3.1.4 Fourth Mediation: Between the Intelligible and the Sensible**

The Fourth mediation is a contemplation that is more elevated than the third mediation but is a “continued ascension”<sup>126</sup> through the third mediation and a “returning to the Father, enclothed in

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<sup>120</sup> C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* [...], p. 84.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

His humanity, [which] corresponds to creation's inherent inclination towards unity in the Logos. This inclination is manifested by Christ on man's behalf."<sup>127</sup> Both the intelligible and sensible belong to the created order but need to be transcended in their differentiation. In the most elevated form of contemplation, man is brought to the "very frontier between revelation and apophatic theology."<sup>128</sup> Apophatic theology is the foundation of Eastern Christian theology and mysticism, and the "more mystical it is, the more directly it aspires to the supreme end of union with God"<sup>129</sup> or the vision of the Taboric Light. Apophaticism "appears as a witness to the fullness of the Holy Spirit; to the Person who, though He fills all things and brings all things to their ultimate fulfillment, yet remains Himself unknown."<sup>130</sup> This stage of mediation therefore involves a higher level of 'apophatic' contemplation. The closer that man gets to the Light of God, the more he sees this "brightness" as "darkness" as it is beyond comprehension yet revealed through experience, "They say for instance, that God is Light, but at the same time add, "because of His surpassing brightness" also in relation to the created light of knowledge, it is darkness."<sup>131</sup>

### 3.1.5 Fifth Mediation: Between God and His Creation

The basic Christian teaching is that man cannot share the nature or essence of God and therefore there cannot be a unity of essence between the uncreated God and created man. In this sense, God remains incomprehensible but man can rise above his own nature and in a "paradoxical"<sup>132</sup> way become a mediator "above the *tropoi* and *logoi* applicable to the first four."<sup>133</sup> This possibility is through Christ's Incarnation who "presents Himself as man before the throne of God."<sup>134</sup> This final unity between God and man is made possible by God's grace in love, that man should be able to,

*penetrate...entirely into God and become all that God might be, without, however, any ontological assimilation. He should receive Him as a substitute for his own ego, being compensated by the gift of God alone, through his ascension in*

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* p. 88

<sup>129</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, [...], p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>131</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos HIEROTHEOS. *The Mind of the Orthodox Church*, Levadia, Greece, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1998, p. 156.

<sup>132</sup> C.f. Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor*, [...], p. 88.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89



Christ. In this way God and man are united without confusion according to the model of the hypostatic union in Christ, as it is conceived within the theological tradition of Chalcedon.<sup>135</sup>

As Thunberg mentions, this possibility of created man uniting with the uncreated God has always been understood since the first Ecumenical Council. For this reason, the theology of St. Gregory Palamas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is simply an elaboration of this final mediation. That is, how is it possible that the uncreated can merge “without confusion” with the created? The answer, by making a distinction between the *uncreated essence* and the *uncreated energies* of God.

As we will see later in Chapter 4, the Light of Christ on Mount Tabor is the realization of man passing through these five stages as a mediator before God; realizing his divine likeness to God and exercising his dominion over the entire fleeting cosmos which was created for the sole purpose of his absorption into God. Lossky writes, “in the overcoming of the primordial separation of the created and the uncreated, the deification of man would have been accomplished and, by him, that of the entire universe.”<sup>136</sup>

### **3.2 The Stages of Deification**

In accordance with Eastern Christian thought, in order to be an authentic Christian, man must live with an eschatological understanding of life and move through three stages of spiritual life, commonly referred to as: Purification, Illumination, and Deification (theosis)<sup>137</sup> which is a process, and being on this path, is what brings salvation gradually according to the Fathers.

Eastern Christianity has always understood spirituality or the continual transfiguration of the person as the goal of the Christian life which can only be accomplished through ascetic and difficult struggle to purify oneself and reach theosis or ‘union’ with God. Theosis is not a simple common notion of some kind of esoteric “enlightenment” or a platonic dualistic transcendence, but actual unity with the uncreated and personal God of the universe with soul and body as a *whole* person where the body is called to participate in the deification of man. The fullness of

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *Dogmatic Theology: Creation, God’s Image in Man, & the Redeeming Work of the Trinity*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017, p. 91.

<sup>137</sup> C.f. Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, HIEROTHEOS, *Saint Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite*, Levadia, Greece, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1997, 400 p.

this deification can only be realized “in the age to come after the resurrection of the dead”<sup>138</sup> but in this life, through the gradual transfiguration of the person, he “adapts”<sup>139</sup> to the conditions of eternal life. This is the basis of the Transfiguration experience; joy and bliss in this life, not just in the next; for if there is no joy in God’s real experienced love, there can be no authentic spirituality.

Writing to the nun Xenia, St. Gregory writes, “As the separation of the soul from the body is the death of the body, so the separation of God from the soul is the death of the soul”<sup>140</sup> and again, “As the death of the soul is authentic death, so the life of the soul is authentic life. Life of the soul is union with God, as life of the body is its union with the soul.”<sup>141</sup>

Through hesychasm (silence and ascetic struggle), the monastic tradition has always understood the deification of man to be the natural course of man’s destiny.

### 3.3 The Mysticism of the Hesychast Tradition

*“Love silence above all things, because it brings you near to fruit that the tongue cannot express...[and] out of this silence something is born that leads us into silence itself.”<sup>142</sup>*

*-Saint Isaac the Syrian*

*“It is impossible for muddy water to grow clear if it is constantly stirred up...”<sup>143</sup>*

*-St. Nilus of Ancyra*

These quotes are not easy for us to understand but the more one climbs the ‘high mountain’ of Tabor, the clearer they become. Archmandrite Aimilianos provides us with a simpler explanation. He says that we need to “experience prayer as a struggle...as a cry from the depths”<sup>144</sup> but this cry is only heard when we start to progress or be transfigured; then this cry is

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<sup>138</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [...], p. 196.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes IV*, [...], p. 296.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>142</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2011, Homily 64, p. 452.

<sup>143</sup> C.f. Kallistos WARE. *The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000, p. 89.

<sup>144</sup> Archmandrite AIMILIANOS. *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, Athens, Greece, Holy Convent of the Annunciation, Ormilias, Indiktos Publishing Company, p. 21.

changed “into silence within an atmosphere of silence.”<sup>145</sup> He elaborates further about the internal noise within us that impedes our ability to ‘hear’ the silence, “When you shout, you can’t hear the other person. You have to stop in order to hear him. When there is a lot of noise and talking going on around you, your own voice gets mixed up with it, and can’t be heard or distinguished.”<sup>146</sup>

The hesychast is someone who pursues *hesychia* (silence), or inner stillness after Christ’s words, “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” (Matt 6:6). The goal of this “secret” prayer describes the monastic hesychastic tradition to achieve “unceasing prayer” (1 Thess 5:17) through the practice of the ‘Jesus prayer’ in order to attain the vision of the Taboric Light.<sup>147</sup>

Arguably, the beginning of the monastic movement was adopted by St. Anthony. “The term *hesychast* was used to designate a “hermit” ... from the very beginning of monastic history.”<sup>148</sup> Hesychasm is a purifying struggle of man towards the Light of God. Working out his salvation in a non-pretentious, authentic, and honest fashion; finding himself in ‘stillness’ and marvelling before the awesome and benevolent God who has given us the capacity to *be*.

St. Gregory Palamas—who came to the defense of the hesychasts after being accused of Messalianism by the Greek Italian Barlaam of Calabria—elaborated on the role of the body in prayer and the possibility for it to be transfigured by the divine light of God. The question put to the hesychasts was, “If God reveals Himself to men as light, and becomes participable by them, how can He also be inaccessible and transcendent?”<sup>149</sup> The hesychasts described their experience of God as the ‘Taboric Light’ which is also experienced by the body. St. Gregory writes, “The spiritual joy which comes from the mind into the body is in no way corrupted by the communion with the body, but transforms the body and makes it spiritual... Thus it is that the

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> C.f. Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS. *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 135.

<sup>148</sup> C.f. Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, N.J., Paulist Press, 1983, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS. *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 104.

whole man becomes spirit, as it is written: “He who is born of Spirit, is spirit” (John 3:6,8). All these things, indeed, become clear by experience.”<sup>150</sup>

The concept of ‘returning to the self’ is the “basis of the hesychast method interpreted by the monks in a corporeal as well as a spiritual sense.”<sup>151</sup> Socrates said, “Know yourself”, but the Fathers challenge us to move beyond ‘knowing ourselves’ to ‘return to ourselves’. St. Gregory Palamas elaborated on what the Fathers called the ‘movement of the mind’ which goes beyond the ancient Greek aphorism *know yourself*, but to *transcend self* and be united with God. In order for man to know the uncreated God—as with Maximus’ writings (above) on man’s ability to see with the “eyes of Christ” —man can participate in the ‘All-Seeing’ Light of God, and through God, he can see God. This is the ‘Self-seeing eye’. St. Gregory of Nyssa also mentions, “For as the eye, by virtue of the bright ray which is by nature wrapped up in it, is in fellowship with the light, and by its innate capacity draws to itself that which is akin to it.”<sup>152</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius in referring to the Light of God, explains, “It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in.”<sup>153</sup>

In describing the dynamics between the transfigured saints and God, St. Nicholas Cabasilas presents the same idea, “He gives them birth, growth, nourishment; He is life and breath. By means of Himself He forms an *eye* [my emphasis] for them, and in addition, gives them light and enables them to see Himself.”<sup>154</sup> St. Isaac’s homilies were intended for his monks to learn the principles of stillness which for him is the “mother of repentance”<sup>155</sup> and the man that can see his sins is “worthy to see himself [and] is greater than he who is deemed worthy to see the angels, for the latter has communion to see with his bodily eyes, but the former through the eyes of the soul.”<sup>156</sup> This gives us further clarity as to the honor of our image after the Archetype. St.

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<sup>150</sup> C.f. Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 51.

<sup>151</sup> John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998, p. 106.

<sup>152</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, [...], p. 478.

<sup>153</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the AREOPAGITE. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, N.J., Paulist Press, 1987, p. 145.

<sup>154</sup> Nicholas CABASILAS. *The Life in Christ*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998, p. 47.

<sup>155</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies*, [...], p. 460.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

Gregory describes the ‘return to self’ as a movement of the mind using Dionysius and Basil as follows,

The mind is like the eye...[it] operates in part according to its function of external observation...along a straight line, and on the other hand, it returns upon itself, when it beholds itself...This last is the most excellent and most appropriate activity of the mind, by which it comes to transcend itself and be united to God...”For the mind” says St. Basil, “which is not dispersed abroad returns to itself, and through itself mounts towards God”... Denys, that unerring contemplator of intelligible things, says also that this movement of the mind cannot succumb to any error.<sup>157</sup>

To summarize, this ‘self-seeing’, is often referred to as the ‘spiritual senses’ which are roused in man through the grace of God by his ascetic struggle. This is an authentic ‘sixth sense’ complementary to the natural bodily senses. The hesychasts learned this through experience, and thus the knowledge of God can only be achieved by this ‘sixth sense’ where a man has been deified and not in some notional idea of God or spirituality. Given the importance of the complementary role of the body, St. Gregory also argues against metempsychosis for it would be impossible to even ‘know yourself’ without the knowledge of the “body of the previous incarnation.”<sup>158</sup> Under the hesychast model, Meyendorff explains the difference between hesychasm and nirvana, “Here we see the gulf that separates hesychast mysticism from Hindu nirvana. The Christian mystic seeks a new life in Christ...That is why the hesychast movement of the fourteenth century never deteriorated into individualistic and subjective mysticism but led in fact to a revival of ecclesiastical sacramentalism.”<sup>159</sup>

For Western Christianity, however, self-knowledge is typically what characterizes a ‘person’. Hierotheos explains, “In the West, the person is spoken of within philosophical, and mainly psychological presuppositions. In other words, the main characteristics of the person are considered to be self-knowledge, reasoning abilities and, chiefly consciousness.”<sup>160</sup> These different presuppositions create different theologies and consequently, a different spirituality.

In Chapter four we will explore the patristic commentaries on the meaning of the Transfiguration narrative “after six days”, but to round off the idea of man’s journey to ‘return to himself’ we can

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<sup>157</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 44.

<sup>158</sup> C.f. John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, [...], p. 107-108.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>160</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos HIEROTHEOS. *The Person in the Orthodox Tradition* [...], p. 130.

also make a connection to the liturgical cycle. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us that the beginning of the day is the evening, and in this evening, we prepare during Vespers for the morning Divine Liturgy by going back to the beginning of the *first* day of the creation of man, “The Church takes us, as it were, to that first evening on which man, called by God to life, opened his eyes and saw what God in His love was giving to him, saw all the beauty, all the glory of the temple in which he was standing, and rendered thanks to God. And in this thanksgiving, he *became himself*.”<sup>161</sup>

Standing in God’s Light, man cannot help but to marvel at creation and the brilliance of His ‘darkness’ and be truly humbled by eventually ‘returning’ through an *honest* reflection of his weakness and dependency on God, and being grateful for what he has received. In giving thanks, he finds God’s erotic love and “becomes himself” to stand as a witness to authentic spirituality on the eighth day. Fr. Alexander elaborates on the importance of giving thanks as a means to discover a saving authentic spirituality for the whole world, “We are not “nice” Christians come apart from the ugly world. If we do not stand precisely as representatives of this world, as indeed the world itself, if we do not bear the whole burden of *this* day, our “piety” may still be pious, but it is not Christian.”<sup>162</sup>

### 3.3.1 Hesychia: A State of Grace

Lossky outlined for us, as we mentioned above, that the early church guarded its mysteries from its ‘enemies’. These enemies are those who do not know the mysteries of deification. This is not a polemic guarding but rather a protective one out of love, and a hope that a small ray of the light of God can pierce their hearts; a truth kept in silence, but to be spoken of when the person can come to see the light for themselves. “Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.” (Luke 12:3) (Matt 10:27).

St. John Climacus (*climacus*—Greek for ‘ladder’) in the second half of the sixth century, composed his *Ladder*, a 30-step guide meant for monastics to climb the ‘spiritual ladder’ and be

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<sup>161</sup> Alexander SCHMEMMANN. *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

transfigured by the Light of Christ. After 40 years of solitude in Tholas, he was made abbot of the great Mount Sinai monastery where he composed this text.<sup>163</sup> Chapter 27 of the text is completely dedicated to “stillness” or hesychia. The effects of this text influenced all of Eastern Christendom and the hesychastic tradition. In this same monastery in the sixth century we find the earliest known icon of the Transfiguration in the current traditional form (See Appendix II, figure 4) St. John was influenced by Evagrius<sup>164</sup> who taught *apatheia*<sup>165</sup> (gnosis or impassibility) or the “putting aside”<sup>166</sup> as the basis of stillness or hesychia and characterised by a noetic<sup>167</sup> or ‘mental prayer’. The summit of an active life in asceticism is *apatheia*, where a person is no longer disturbed by the passions. St. John explains that the hesychast is someone “who has “returned to himself,” who has—paraphrasing St. Isaac the Syrian, “entered into the treasure house that is within.””<sup>168</sup> St. John refers to this ‘state of being’ as an exile; as the “disciplined heart...unseen meditation, the striving to be humble...the longing for what is divine...an outpouring of love... [and] a depth of silence.”<sup>169</sup> This stillness is what he refers to as a constant “wordless prayer of the spirit”<sup>170</sup> He also provides us with an interesting analogy to describe how to guard this treasure within, “The cat keeps hold of the mouse. The thought of the hesychast keeps hold of his spiritual mouse. Do not mock the analogy. Indeed, if you do, it shows you still do not understand the meaning of stillness.”<sup>171</sup>

The mystic writer, St. Nicholas Cabasilas, a saint of the Orthodox Church who’s writings are also used in the Liturgy of the Hours in the Roman Catholic Church, also provides that we should, “*not surrender the treasure* [my emphasis] nor extinguish the torch when it has been lighted... [nor] contribute nothing which is either hostile to the life or produces death...[and] that

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<sup>163</sup> C.f. St. John CLIMACUS. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*: Classics of Western Spirituality, Mahwah, N.J., Paulist Press, 1978, p. xxi.

<sup>164</sup> Although Evagrius was condemned along with Origen by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (A.D. 553), his teachings on prayer inspired the hesychasts who converted his Neoplatonic intellectualistic mysticism on “prayer of the mind” to “prayer of the heart”. This was later known as the “Jesus prayer”. C.f. Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 2-3. He was also friends with St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nyssa who ordained him deacon.

<sup>165</sup> Not in the Stoic sense of ‘apathy’ or ‘dispassion’.

<sup>166</sup> St. John CLIMACUS. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, [...], p. 52.

<sup>167</sup> From *nous*. Refer to note 13, p. 7 for the definition of ‘nous’.

<sup>168</sup> St. John CLIMACUS. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, [...], p. 51.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, Step 3, p. 85.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, Step 19, p. 195.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, Step 27, p. 262.

no one should draw the sword against himself, nor flee from happiness, nor toss the crowns of victory from off his head.”<sup>172</sup>

In the preface to the writings of Evagrius, J. Leclercq reflects on his teachings related to ‘guarding one’s treasure’ and man’s eventual deification, “It is this obscure presence of God in his depths that man must discover and bring to light. Then in him in a certain sense God encounters God<sup>173</sup> by the spirit of the risen Christ, and then there is peace: that calm, that security, that repose, that Sabbath, that leisure, that reality so rich that it cannot be circumscribed by any words.”<sup>174</sup> True liberation for the saint who climbs the ‘ladder’ is *complete* leisure precisely because he has seen the Light of God. He has been transfigured and he lives only for this; complete freedom from worldly cares, where now he can say he “lives, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal 2:20). The challenge for modern man—who is not excluded from his duty to pray and guard his treasure—is to find complete leisure by applying the principles of hesychasm to daily living in the modern world where all things can be transfigured.

In many of the patristic writings, we find this idea of ‘guarding’ and augmenting the grace that we have received from God. St. Athanasius refers to it in his *Incarnation* multiple times, mainly as “preserving” this grace, “with the promise of bliss conditionally upon his *perseverance* [my emphasis] in grace.”<sup>175</sup> And again, he connects this guarding effort of man to arrive at the likeness of God, “For man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out of what is not; but by reason of his likeness to Him that is (and if he still *preserved* this likeness by keeping Him in his knowledge) he would stay his natural corruption, and remain incorrupt.”<sup>176</sup> Evagrius describes this state in another way, “The state of prayer can be aptly described as a *habitual state* [my emphasis] of imperturbable calm (*απαθεια*).”<sup>177</sup> This *apatheia* where a person can emulate the likeness of God—is for Evagrius what leads man to *agape*, or ‘divine love’. Elsewhere, he calls

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<sup>172</sup> Nicholas CABASILAS. *The Life in Christ*, [...], p. 49.

<sup>173</sup> This is the ‘Self-Seeing Eye’ mentioned earlier.

<sup>174</sup> Evagrius PONTICUS. *The Praktikos Chapters on Prayer*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Cistercian Publications (trans. John Eudes Bamberger), 1981, p. xii.

<sup>175</sup> Sant ATHANASIUS. *The Incarnation* [...], 3:1.

<sup>176</sup> Sant ATHANASIUS. *The Incarnation* [...], 4:6.

<sup>177</sup> Evagrius PONTICUS. *The Praktikos, Chapters on Prayer*, [...], p. 63.



this apatheia the “health of the soul”<sup>178</sup> that “maintains its calm as it beholds the affairs of life”<sup>179</sup> and not only remains undisturbed by “changing events but the one which remains unmoved at the memory of them as well.”<sup>180</sup>

By examining the deeper sense of the above references, we get a sense of authentic “bliss” (in the words of Athanasius) through authentic spirituality, not just ‘happiness’. Not a ‘state of being’ or pursuing a mere ‘way of life’ where man could be led to even idolize this way of life, but something authentic and uncompromising.

A contemporary theologian, Metropolitan Nikolaos, defines this mode of being as follows, “The Christian life is not a personal discovery or a choice of lifestyles, but a conscientious response to the divine calling. It is *not* [my emphasis] a way of life, but a state of grace.”<sup>181</sup> This “state of grace” is perhaps more descriptive of the condition of the prayerful soul which is not only preserved, but augmented, and eventually *deified* whereas a “way of life” could be understood and practiced as a fashion and one can be led to pride.

If we return to the work of St. Maximus and the five mediations we discussed earlier, man must make a “continual effort to live out the likeness of God, which is the goal of his life.”<sup>182</sup> Nellas summarizes the summit of this “continual effort” up Mount Tabor, where man has united created and uncreated nature (i.e. the fifth meditation) and, “manifests them as one and identical with each other by virtue of the *habitual* state of grace that he has attained...and he becomes everything that God is except for identity of essence...and as the prize for his ascent to God he comes to possess God Himself alone. For God is the end of the movement of all that moves, the firm and immovable ground of all that is drawn towards Him...”<sup>183</sup> This “end of the movement” through man’s ascetic struggle up the ‘high mountain’ is depicted in the icon of the Transfiguration (See Appendix II, figure 2), where Christ is static and the prophets who have been deified are also static gazing at Him ‘face to face’.

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Metropolitan of Mesogaia and Lavroetiki, NIKOLAOS. *Investing in the Kingdom of God*, Montréal, Québec, Alexander Press, 2009, p. 64.

<sup>182</sup> Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos*, [...], p. 61.

<sup>183</sup> Panayiotis NELLAS. *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* [...], p. 213.

### 3.3.2 Hesychia and Asceticism

For the hesychast, the end goal of all effort is to acquire the Holy Spirit and be deified through ascetic struggle, fasting, and prayer. As we mentioned before, the body and soul make up the whole person, and fasting is therefore necessary to reach *apatheia* where the hesychast practices the ‘emptying’ of the self so as to make room for the fullness of the Holy Spirit. One of the principles of hesychia is that when man receives the grace of God, his body is also changed. In the Transfiguration of Christ, his face and His whole being, “shone like the sun”. In addition, as we will discuss later, the eyes of the Apostles were also transfigured so they can bear the light of God.

In terms of prayer, the Jesus Prayer is indispensable for Eastern Christians. As we mentioned earlier, the goal of the Jesus Prayer is to fulfill the command of St. Paul to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17) as well as in the Lord’s words, “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?” (Lk 18:7). The prayer in its longer form is, “Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is the noetic prayer of the heart that moves beyond the rational and the contemplative.

In Acts 19:13-17, we see the miracles by the name of Jesus alone where many came to the faith. The hesychast tradition has shown that the simple invocation of the name of Jesus brings a man to salvation. St. Athanasius also mentions this, “For where Christ is named, and His faith, there all idolatry is deposed and all imposture of evil spirits is exposed, and any spirit is unable to endure even the name, nay even on barely hearing it flies and disappears.”<sup>184</sup> The hesychasts therefore in repeating His name and confessing Him as “Lord” understood the great deifying power of this prayer. The great teacher Diadochus of Photike that we mentioned earlier seems to have been the first in 458 AD to teach that we should purify the heart through the name of Jesus.”<sup>185</sup>

In outlining the attributes of the Jesus Prayer according to the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, Fr. Lev informs us of its attribute of “an instrument of transfiguration of men and

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<sup>184</sup> Sant ATHANASIUS. *The Incarnation*, [...], 30:6.

<sup>185</sup> Lev GILLET. “A Monk of the Eastern Church”, *The Jesus Prayer*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987, p. 36-37.

things.”<sup>186</sup> He also encourages us to rediscover the use of the prayer to “bring new life to our souls” and also it can “serve the cause of Christian unity, for the invocation of the name of Jesus was at the very beginning common to all, and it still remains acceptable and accessible to all. But its purpose is not only to re-establish bonds between those who find themselves divided, but first of all and above all to rekindle devotion to our Lord.”<sup>187</sup> Fr. Lev is therefore inviting *all* Christians East and West alike, to rediscover the beauty and the power of this prayer to transfigure, regardless of affiliation. He adds, “The name of Jesus, once it has become the center of our life, brings everything together.”<sup>188</sup>

Similar to the constant remembrance of God which for the Eastern Christian is the name of “Jesus”, in Islam, there is the *dhikr*, which we could define as the constant remembrance of Allah (God) and His benevolence. In both practices, the focus is not contemplation, but the heart, where purification of the heart and a pure intention of love for God—not reward—is what brings a person to ‘unceasing prayer’. Through the study of Gardet on the *dhikr*, Meyendorff mentions that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century there was a lot of exchange between Christian monks and Islam where the prayer of the ‘divine name’ whether ‘Jesus’ or ‘Allah’ was common. “A prayer of the divine Name linked with respiration was so widespread in Islamic circles that no one can deny reciprocal compenetration of the two spiritual ways.”<sup>189</sup> What is important to note from this, is that these practices are reflective of the desire of the soul to know the True God and be loved by Him in authentic fashion.

St. Symeon the New Theologian taught that the Jesus Prayer is for everyone, “whether clergy, monastics, or laity”<sup>190</sup> as an “unavoidable duty.”<sup>191</sup> The hesychasts learned that the repetition of this prayer eventually settled in the heart as ceaseless prayer even while the monk slept. St. Symeon instructs that no matter where we find ourselves, this prayer can be constantly repeated,

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. It is possible here that Fr. Lev is alluding to the ‘filioque’ (the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son) as a primary reason of the continued separation of Eastern and Western Christianity since the West does not subscribe to the idea of deification. The double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son infers that the energies of the Holy Spirit would be created, not uncreated, thus making deification impossible.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>189</sup> John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, [...], p. 59.

<sup>190</sup> SYMEON, the New Theologian. *Saint Symeon of Thessalonike: Treatise on Prayer*, Brookline, Massachusetts, Hellenic College Press, 1984, p. 16.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17

“whether sitting or walking...He will find great calm and joy, as all who have concerned themselves with this did in practice.” He explains that the invocation of the name of the Lord is what invites grace to the heart, “...purveyor of the Holy Spirit, bringer of divine gifts and purifier of the heart...[and] conveyor of divine illumination...”<sup>192</sup>

Bishop Ignatius says that “He who does not train himself to frequent prayer will never receive unceasing prayer”<sup>193</sup> which is a “gift of God, given to a slave and servant of His of proved fidelity...a sign that all the powers of his soul are bent on God.”<sup>194</sup>

In the ascetic tradition of the Eastern Church, fasting and prayer are essential for man to arrive at ‘apatheia’ or “divine passion.”<sup>195</sup> A balanced approach between prayer, fasting and sacramental life has always been at the core of this methodology. Although scriptural contemplation is of course valuable, the early Church contemplated from the inside out. They were a *living* Gospel, transmitting the teachings of the faith from one person to another; spreading the Light of their joy and liberation. There was no fear in them, except for the ‘darkness’ of the divine knowledge which they treasured. Nor were they purely motivated by a hedonistic imagery—the dread and punishment of the after-life. The fear they knew was of a different sort; a fear of losing the inferno of Light that continuously set their hearts ablaze, that is, the fear of losing their ‘state of grace’—their little “mouse”.

This ‘unceasing’ state of prayer was their transfigured heart beat; the same Beat that John heard as he leaned on the bosom of Christ, and the fruit generated patiently from the fear experienced when confessing the depth of the darkness of their wanting condition before God and accepting their absolute dependency on Him as the One who’s Heartbeat sustains their existence and the entire world. And from the depth of this darkness of man they were raised to the darkness of God and *saw* for the first time. They migrated from the dark cloud of the world and moved into the darkness of the Light of the Taboric cloud and the certainty of the transfiguring effects of this Light was enough to shine for those around them to believe.

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>193</sup> Ignatius BRIANCHANINOV. *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, Jordanville, N.Y., Holy Trinity Monastery, 1997, p. 83.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Georgios I. MANTZARIDIS. *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, [...], p. 78.

### 3.4 The Theology of St. Gregory Palamas

#### 3.4.1 Uncreated Essence Versus Uncreated Energies of God

The distinction between the uncreated essence and the uncreated energies lies at the center of St. Gregory's theology. Mantzaridis provides us with an accurate and concise summary,

Palamas discovers a multitude of instances in which God reveals Himself to men as light. The theophanies of the Old Testament, the illumination of Moses' face, the vision of Stephen the first martyr, the light on the road to Damascus, and above all, the light of Christ's transfiguration on mount Tabor—all these are various forms of the revelation of God's natural light to men. God, invisible and nonparticipable in His essence, becomes visible and participable in the Spirit to the faithful, by virtue of His energy.<sup>196</sup>

Over the issue of the filioque that arose with Barlaam who claimed that the Holy Spirit cannot be known, St. Gregory came to the defence of hesychasm with the empirical truth of authentic spirituality. Using the Transfiguration as support for the nature of the Taboric Light, he composed the “Triads for the Defence of the Holy Hesychasts” and the “Hagiorite Tome” to present Christian mysticism as part of the divine plan of God and the salvation of man.<sup>197</sup> Two successive councils in 1341 and again in 1347, and then in 1351 expressed the truth of his theology.<sup>198</sup>

In Barlaam's humanistic rationality, the Light of Christ on Mount Tabor was simply an apparition, “a created mirage...a figment of the imagination”<sup>199</sup> that came and went like a lightning bolt and accused the hesychasts of Messalianism, which Gregory refutes since Barlaam was stirring contrary to the Church and the saints, “If anyone maintains that the light which shone about the disciples on Mount Tabor was an apparition and a symbol of the kind that now is and now is not, but has no real being and is an effect that not only does not surpass comprehension, but is inferior to it, he clearly contends against the doctrines of the saints.”<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96-97.

<sup>197</sup> C.f. John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, [...], p. 88.

<sup>198</sup> C.f. Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 6-7.

<sup>199</sup> Leonid OUSPENSKY. *Theology of the Icon*, [...], p. 238.

<sup>200</sup> C.f. The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes IV*, [...], p. 422.

In his 34<sup>th</sup> Homily on the Transfiguration, St. Gregory repeats the same explanation, and that the disciples saw the divine light of God by passing from “flesh to spirit”<sup>201</sup> and that they “blaspheme [to] think that the chosen apostles saw the light of the Lord’s transfiguration with their created faculty of sight, and in this way they endeavor to bring down to the level of a created object not just that light—God’s power and kingdom—but even the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>202</sup>

St. Gregory clarified what this Taboric Light is, “neither a natural emanation from the essence of God nor a created energy of God. On the contrary, the world is a result of His uncreated energy.”<sup>203</sup> St. Gregory elaborated that man can come to a knowledge of God through the “apprehension of [His] power, wisdom, and providence”<sup>204</sup> and on another level, that of contemplation. He explains that real contemplation is “not of the divine nature...but of the *glory* of His nature”<sup>205</sup> for this ability of man to have communion with the uncreated glory of God is precisely how deification is possible, “However, even though this glory is different from the divine nature, it cannot be classified amongst the things subject to time, for in its transcendence “it is not”, because it belongs to the divine nature in an ineffable manner.”<sup>206</sup> By failing to recognize the distinction in God’s nature and His glory, Barlaam thought that “everything that had a beginning is created”<sup>207</sup>, but St. Gregory asserts that “there *are*, however, energies of God which have a beginning and an end”<sup>208</sup> but as they relate to the “activity [of God]...as directed towards created things.”<sup>209</sup> The example he gives is that when God completed the creation of the cosmos, He “rested from all his works” (Gen 2:3), meaning the *activity* had a beginning and an end but not the transcendent nature of His energies.

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<sup>201</sup> C.f. St. Gregory Palamas. *The Homilies*, [...], p. 269. A common idea of St. Gregory (referring to St. Maximus) that the Apostles passed to the ‘fifth mediation’ by being “transported from the plane of the physical and human to that of the spiritual and divine.” See note 519, p. 593. This idea is also found in scripture (1 Cor 15:44).

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> C.f. John ROMANIDES. *The Ancestral Sin*, Ridgewood NJ, Zephyr Publishing, 2008, p. 54.

<sup>204</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 60.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

Borrowing from Dionysius, St. Gregory gives the example of the distinction between heat and fire, “through his sense of touch, a man perceives the warmth of fire”<sup>210</sup> but if he ventures to try to experience the power of this fire by touching it, “it would at once shrink back and run away, bitterly regretting its curiosity .... [for] heat is accessible to the touch, but its burning power remains entirely beyond participation.”<sup>211</sup>

### 3.4.2 The Transfiguration of the Body

Moving away from the platonic dualistic method of prayer of Evagrius who separated the mind in prayer to “become free of all matter”<sup>212</sup>, St. Gregory follows the hesychasts, Macarius, Symeon, and Nicephorus, that the aim of prayer is to restore the unity of spirit and body as a single “psychosomatic organism” and that the “heart is the vital center of this psychosomatic life.”<sup>213</sup> That is, the ‘Jesus prayer’.

This is relevant to the transfiguration experience for it is not only an experience beyond the senses but also something experienced with the body. Symeon Metaphrastes cited by St. Gregory says that,

The blessed Moses, by virtue of the glory of the Spirit which shone on his face, and which no man can gaze upon, showed by this sign how the bodies of the saints would be glorified after the resurrection of the righteous ... and the glory which now enriches the souls of the saints will cover and clothe their naked bodies after the resurrection, and will elevate them to the heavens, clad in the glory...of the Spirit...which the souls of the saints have received now in part...Thus, glorified by the divine light, the saints will be always with the Lord.<sup>214</sup>

At the Second Coming, the saints will then experience the fullness of transfiguration. St. Symeon says that the *Day of Judgment* is referred to as such not because it will occur on a particular day but because the glory of his divinity will once again be revealed as it did on Tabor but this time to all men and to the whole cosmic order, “Even the visible sun will be hidden by the radiance of the Master and will become invisible, just as now the stars are eclipsed by the former and not

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Evagrius PONTICUS. *The Praktikos Chapters on Prayer*, [...], p. 75.

<sup>213</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 15.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

seen. The stars will then be quenched and all visible things will be rolled up like a scroll, that is, they will give way and yield their place to the Master. And He alone will be at once “Day” and God ... [and] He will be revealed to all as He is<sup>215</sup>, and, “will fill all things with His light.”<sup>216</sup>

The above description of the vision of light is very similar to the testimony of St. Paisios of Mount Athos who reposed in 1994 and since canonized. While he prayed one evening, his dark cell was filled with a “blue-white light” and he felt his eyes being strengthened to endure the brightness of the uncreated light. Hours passed and when he came back to himself, he felt as if it was still evening outside. He remarked to a fellow monk that it seemed that the day did not dawn, who replied that it was ten o’clock. In his own words, “Only then did I realize what had happened...the ‘full moon’ was the sun.”<sup>217</sup>

In fact, the color of this ‘light’ has been testified many times by the saints as being that of “blue-white”. For this reason, the ancient Church, trying to capture the deification experience which they knew all too well, developed the rich iconographic tradition of the Eastern Church which sometimes makes use of the blue color for the background of icons instead of pure gold, which symbolize and reflect the light of God coming to the beholder during prayer. Sometimes a light-colored blue is used, but oftentimes a very dark blue, which is still this same light but calling our attention to its ‘darkness’ or the incomprehensible ‘abyss’ of God. St. Jerome says that the hyacinth (i.e. blue) color garment of the high priest, “represents the color of air, and the elevation of the heart above earthly things.”<sup>218</sup> Thomas Aquinas says that the hyacinth fringes on this garment were a symbol of aspiration towards heaven—which must rule all actions.”<sup>219</sup> As we mentioned earlier, blue symbolizes the sky—creation, calling our attention to the Creator of all things.

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<sup>215</sup> Symeon is referring here to 1 John 3:2, “...when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is.”

<sup>216</sup> SYMEON, the New Theologian. *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, Volume 1, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995, p. 143.

<sup>217</sup> C.f. Hieromonk DAMASCENE. *Christ the Eternal Tao*, [...], p. 392.

<sup>218</sup> C.f. Pavel FLORENSKY. *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 390.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*



Perhaps the most-known vision of the light of God is the testimony of N.A. Motovilov and the light emanating from St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1832). He is often referred to as “the most powerful light that has ever shined in Russia.”<sup>220</sup> While explaining to Motovilov that the goal of life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, Motovilov questioned St. Seraphim on how one can be certain of having acquired it. St. Seraphim then transfigured before him and Motovilov could not bear to look at him. In his own words, “Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: ‘We are now both in God’s Spirit! Why don’t you look at me?’”<sup>221</sup> What is typically observed with the testimonies of the vision of light is that their eyes are forever transfigured, never to regain their original scale. St. Seraphim’s vision of light was so well-known that he is often depicted in an oval mandorla similar to the Transfiguration icon (See Appendix II, figure 6).

Lossky, quoting St. Irenaeus in regards to the next life said, “For men will see God in order to live” to which he explains, “The face of God which one could not see without dying becomes in the age to come the source of life.”<sup>222</sup> Returning to the idea of the ‘Self-Seeing Eye’, when a person is deified, he acquires an “‘organ of vision’ that is neither the senses, nor the intellect...[but] is admitted to ‘true vision’ when he ceases to see.”<sup>223</sup> This capacity of man to transcend his own nature and beyond, implies a “transfiguration of man by the Spirit of God”<sup>224</sup> where even apophatic theology cannot reach. Likely referring to St. Paul (1 Cor 2:9)<sup>225</sup>, St. Gregory adds, “Do you now understand that in place of the intellect, the eyes and ears, they acquire the incomprehensible Spirit and by Him hear, see and comprehend?”<sup>226</sup> This gives us further insight into St. Paul’s other passage, “I know not whether I saw out of the body or in the body.” (2 Cor 12:2).

Metropolitan Hierotheos provides us with a summary of the teachings of St. Gregory in regards to what the Apostles experienced on Tabor. He explains that they experienced *real* divinization

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<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>222</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Vision of God*, London, England, The Faith Press, 1963, p. 33.

<sup>223</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 14.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

both externally and interiorly, however, the interior (pre-Pentecost) experience was nonetheless outside the Theanthropic Body of Christ. After Pentecost, they were able to then experience it once again interiorly but as members of the Body of Christ.<sup>227</sup>

St. Anastasios of Sinai provides us with remarkable insight in regards to the experience after death for the deified saints following the passage of St. Paul, “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor 15:44). Those that have not been deified have not surpassed the physical senses and therefore will no longer be able to express themselves as they have been separated from the body, “whereas those souls that have acquired the Holy Spirit and have become like a body or *organ of the Spirit* [my emphasis] ... enjoy bliss even after their death thanks to the illumination of the Spirit...”<sup>228</sup> To this, he calls us to ponder, “before the resurrection of bodies has taken place, and while the bones and fleshy parts of the saints are scattered, how is it possible for them [the saints] to be recognized as fully formed men ...or how Paul, or Peter ...came to be seen at the same moment very often in different places?”<sup>229</sup>

Thus, after death, the saints continue to live on in the Holy Spirit, as they did while on earth, and the rest await the general resurrection. St. Anastasios also elaborates on the resurrection of the bodies as an *apokatastasis* (restoration) to the “primitive state”<sup>230</sup> of the pre-fallen Adam. The transfiguration of the body allows us to interpret St. Paul’s passage of the resurrection very differently, “Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” (1 Cor 15:51). He tells us further that only those who pass physically from corruption to incorruption—that is, they are deified—will have this experience after death, “then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.” (2 Cor 15:54). That is, the person has been deified and “swallowed by the Holy Spirit”. For this reason, the Eastern Church does not subscribe to the Latin Church’s idea of Purgatory as it believes that this life is the only opportunity to be deified and we shall receive in the next life according to our measure

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<sup>227</sup> Metropolitan of Nafpaktos HIEROTHEOS. *The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, Levadia, Greece, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1997, p. 163.

<sup>228</sup> J.A MUNITIZ. *Anastasios of Sinai: Questions and Answers*, Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols Publishers, 2011, p. 91.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

attained in *this* life. In other words, repentance cannot be extended but hope is placed rather on God's mercy.

St. Symeon, also agrees with this view for those who have not been deified because "they lacked zeal to see the light of His glory...and have him completely indwelling in themselves, He will also naturally be unapproachable for them in the future."<sup>231</sup>

The rediscovery of the theology of St. Gregory Palamas presents contemporary Christianity with new possibilities. He introduces modern man to the Eastern Fathers of the past, and provides us with an opportunity for an authentic spirituality not only to make sense of a world continuously going astray, but offers man the experience of the Transfiguration in this life. For Christ only "knoweth the Father and reveals him" (Matt 12:27) in the Taboric Light. The next passage after this is an open invitation for *perpetual leisure* in a 'state of grace', "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt 12:28).

## CHAPTER 4: THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

*"The grace of the Transfiguration has shone everywhere and strangely altered everything, pain and joy, life and death. Everything interpenetrates. It is everywhere and nowhere. It is perceived and understood in an unaccustomed way."*<sup>232</sup>

*-Archmandrite Vasileios of Mount Athos*

### 4.1 The Icon of the Transfiguration and its Elements

We have three separate Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration of Christ (See Appendix I), with some slight differences. In this chapter, we shall explore some of the key elements and deeper meanings of the event of the Transfiguration and we will use the icon of Theophanes the Greek for most iconographic references (See Appendix II, Figure 2). This typical current form of the icon was modelled after the earliest known representation in the 6<sup>th</sup> century at St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai (See Appendix II, Figure 4).

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<sup>231</sup> SYMEON, the New Theologian. *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses*, [...], p. 143.

<sup>232</sup> Archmandrite VASILEIOS. *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church*, [...], p. 87.

There is a lot of movement in this icon. Christ goes up the ‘high mountain’ with the Apostles on the left side of the icon, transfigures, then goes down with the same Apostles on the right side. The different positions of the Apostles reflect their varying capacities to receive the light. These ‘agitated’ positions are also a reflection of their ‘lack of perfection’ which will come later after Pentecost.

The “transfiguration” is really that of the Apostles not Christ because He always possesses this Light, but for the first time He allowed the Apostles to see it. Rather, the eyes of the Apostles were transfigured that they may thus see His light. What is the proof? They recognized Elijah and Moses who they had never seen before.

#### 4.1.1 The Vision of Light

*“But in my adult years, when I returned to Christ as perfect God, the unoriginated Light shone on me. This wonderful Light, even in the measure vouchsafed to me from on High, eclipsed all else, just as the rising sun eclipsed the brightest star.”<sup>233</sup>*

*-Archmandrite Sophrony*

The light that is manifested from Christ on Mount Tabor is generally defined as the *glory* of God. This light has certain characteristics; firstly, it is incomprehensible. St. Gregory Palamas explained that the uncreated energies that come into contact with man is what allows man to experience God’s glory. He elaborates that the vision of light does not make one “lose his senses” but “drives him mad” by the “Spirit of wisdom; for this light is also the wisdom of God, present in the deified man, yet not separate from God.”<sup>234</sup>

We have many accounts of the vision of the Light of God to the saints. A recurring presupposition to this vision is that it is a gift from God and not a reward, for the person who climbs the ‘high mountain’ does so out of love for God and not in anticipation of anything. Also expressed very commonly in patristic writings is that the surest way to know whether one has attained the stage of purification from the passions is that they have not yet received the vision of

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<sup>233</sup> Archmandrite SOPHRONY. *We Shall See Him as He is*. Essex, England, Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 2004, p. 155-156.

<sup>234</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 91.

the Light, but that is not to say that there is no benefit. What is important is being on the path of purification toward this light.

Another characteristic is that it is transcendent yet all-permeating. It reveals itself where it *wills* and is not dependent on created medium to travel. According to the Fathers, the Light of God was not something that surrounded Jesus but emanating from *within* Him and the power of this Light touched all the created world. On the icon, we see traces of light on the mountain and clothes of the Apostles (Appendix II, figure 2) to indicate that the uncreated light does indeed come into contact with the created world.

Given that the light is uncreated, it is not something that is transmitted through the air—a created medium. St. Gregory, citing Dionysius, writes, “this light is not mediated of air ...Indeed, when it was shining on Tabor more brilliantly than the sun, the people of the area did not even see it!”<sup>235</sup> Another indication of this is the vision of light of St. Paul, where his companions could not see this light, but Paul was blinded.

St. Jerome says that He “was not so transfigured ... that He lost His hands and feet ...and rolled along in a round shape like that of the sun but the same members glowed with the brightness of the sun ...[but not only His face], but His other members were beheld as well ...his garments became white and glistening, not aërial ...”<sup>236</sup> St. Jerome wants to call our attention here to the fact that this Light was like nothing else conceivable by man yet beheld as a real experience by the Apostles. For this reason, they were blinded as this Light transcended the natural world. From these accounts, we can conclude that all matter is permeated, but maintain their nature. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom—who himself had a vision of the Lord—in speaking of the Transfiguration, agrees that “matter itself is pervaded” and that miracles do not happen apart from matter as an “act of magic” which is an act of “enslaving, depriving someone of freedom...to stand in its own right.”<sup>237</sup> From these accounts we can conclude that the nature of this light is beyond imagination, fascination, superstition, and delusion. It is simply the light of Truth revealed to truth-seekers.

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>236</sup> Saint JEROME, *To Pammachius Against John of Jerusalem*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Volume VI, [...], p. 439.

<sup>237</sup> Metropolitan Anthony BLOOM. *God and Man*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983, p. 66.

Similarly, St. Gregory arguing against those who say that the Taboric light was created, makes an interesting connection by asking the question, “Why would Christ come in glory and kingly power like this, [i.e. natural air], in the age to come, when there will be no need of air, or light or space or things such as this, but God will take the place of all of them, according to the Apostle?”<sup>238</sup>

Another characteristic is that the essence of this light is one, yet the rays emanating from it are multiple. We see this understanding from the early Fathers. St. Basil writes, “The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.”<sup>239</sup> Ten centuries later, St. Gregory Palamas elaborates on this: “The divine supraessentiality is never named in the plural. But the divine and uncreated grace of God is indivisibly divided...”<sup>240</sup>

Lossky explains another characteristic of this light, that although we participate in this light “according to the measure of our capacity” God still “manifests Himself fully, and is not diminished in His energies ... He is wholly present in each ray of His divinity ...the energy is not a divine function which exists *on account* of creatures.”<sup>241</sup>

Lastly, this light is beyond intellectual contemplation but is revealed rather to those who have acquired the likeness of God through purification. For St. Gregory Palamas, union with this light is accomplished by the “cessation of intellectual activity [and] by the Holy Spirit...For it is in this light that the light is seen, and that which sees operates in a similar light...Having separated itself from all other beings, it becomes itself all light and is assimilated to what it sees...united to

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<sup>238</sup> St. Gregory PALAMAS, *Homily 34 on the Transfiguration*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, (Brian E. Daley, translator), Popular Patristics Series, Yonkers, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013, p. 364.

<sup>239</sup> St. Basil, *Letter 234*. C.f. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202234.htm>, (page consulted on December 12, 2018). This letter by St. Basil is a main source for Eastern Christian apophatic theology where he maintains that being ignorant of God’s essence, does not make man ignorant of God, precisely due to His manifold energies that are transcendent and immanent.

<sup>240</sup> The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes IV*, [...], p. 377.

<sup>241</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, [...], p. 74.

it without mingling, being itself light and seeing light through light...if it sees itself, it sees light.”<sup>242</sup> If these energies were created, these above characteristics would not be observable.

As a person therefore ‘becomes light’, becomes deified, he becomes the likeness of God. He no longer sees in a mirror dimly but “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12), light from light through the grace of the Holy Spirit conferred on man at Pentecost. The tradition has always understood that the person who cannot see God has not yet achieved His likeness in a reciprocal exchange from one person to another God-Person. Citing Bossuet, Lossky writes, “anyone who sees an object in a mirror does not have it ‘face to face’ but has its back to it; one must therefore turn one’s back to the mirror in order to see the object itself.”<sup>243</sup> Florensky provides that a lack of reciprocal viewing is the situation of “*Hell or Hades (αδης) ...without view, viewless*, i.e., that which is deprived of view or appearance”<sup>244</sup> He also connects “reality” with “appearance”.<sup>245</sup> This idea is also represented by the iconographic tradition where the “*viewless*” person is portrayed as not being a ‘full’ person, and thus depicting them in a side profile—that is, they do not look upon God with their totality. For example, the great Apostle Paul is depicted in side profile in the icon of the Ascension (See Appendix II, figure 3 – the first figure to the right of the Virgin Mary) which although not historically accurate (i.e. he was not present), it is a reflection of his spiritual state; his ‘*viewlessness*’ prior to his vision which engages the viewer to reflect on the depth of his conversion and love for God.

To conclude, it would only be fitting to end this section with the words of Archbishop Basil Krivocheine who cites St. Symeon the New Theologian, the ‘master of vision’ who saw the light of God every time he celebrated the Divine Liturgy,

Those who truly possess the Holy Spirit are rare in our day. Not having had such an experience, the others deny its possibility, “They do not believe that in our

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<sup>242</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 65-66.

<sup>243</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Vision of God*, [...], p. 25. The original reference as cited by Lossky is “Bossuet”. Given that this book is a compilation of a series of talks given by Lossky on ‘The Vision of God’, I’m assuming that this was an error in the transcription and he may actually be quoting Jacques-Bénigne “Bossuet”, however, no efforts has been made to verify this.

<sup>244</sup> Pavel FLORENSKY. *Iconostasis*, [...], p. 155.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

generation there can be someone who is moved ...by the divine Spirit ...For every man judges others by his own condition...in virtue or in vice.”<sup>246</sup>

Symeon never ceased to repeat that this vision of God begins here on earth...If indeed purity takes place here below, so too will the vision. But if you say that the vision only exists after death, you will of necessity also place purification after death.<sup>247</sup>

#### 4.1.2 The Sixth and Eighth Day

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, the narrative starts off with, “After six days,” but in Luke it says, “Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings” (See Appendix I). What are “these sayings”? According to Chrysostom, the six days (or eight) follows when Christ spoke the words, “If anyone wants to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.” (Luke 9:23). For Chrysostom, the six and the eight days are the same since the eight days includes the day Christ spoke these words and the day He led them up the mountain.<sup>248</sup> This is also a hint that the Transfiguration is linked to the Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ.

St. Gregory Palamas provides us with an interesting connection between the ‘sixth’ day and the ‘eighth’ day. He refers to the passage before the Transfiguration where Jesus was speaking to all His disciples, “Verily I say unto you. There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” (Matt. 16:28). St. Gregory says that this is specifically referring to the Transfiguration event; that is, some of them will see the glory of God (i.e. the Light of God) before their death. He calls this the “promise” and the actual Transfiguration, the “epiphany”. For him, both these days are important as they elevate our mind beyond any quantitative notion but to surpass it, to express the deeper mysteries of this event. He explains, “there were eight [persons] on the mountain, and six were visible!”<sup>249</sup> Meaning, the obvious persons, Jesus, the three Apostles, the two prophets, and then we have the Father, “bearing witness to the Son by His own voice...and the other [the Holy Spirit] ...shining forth through the bright cloud and revealing the Son’s singleness of nature and oneness of light with

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<sup>246</sup> Archbishop Basil KRIVOCHEINE. *In the Light of Christ*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986, p. 167.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>248</sup> St. John CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 56 on Matthew*, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, [...], p. 70.

<sup>249</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 34 on the Transfiguration*, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, [...], p. 357.



him and with the Father.”<sup>250</sup> Therefore these details according to St. Gregory, were provided by the Apostles as a “figure of those who were gathered together on the mountain, in a mysterious yet visible way.”<sup>251</sup> He also makes a connection to our five-fold senses and that when “there is added the spoken word that is perceptible, it makes our sensibility six-fold ... then on the eighth day the Kingdom of God will appear, by the power of a still greater force.”<sup>252</sup> This is the ‘sixth sense that we described earlier.

Origen says that the number six is a perfect number<sup>253</sup> and represents the six days of creation. Creation, however, is the temporal world—the visible, and man must rise above “things visible”<sup>254</sup> although, he does not provide specifically what the “eighth day” means. However, St. Ambrose says the eighth day represents the resurrection which happened on the eighth day.<sup>255</sup>

The eighth day is also known as the first day, or the day following the sabbath and the “six days of labor” (Exodus 20:9-10). Christ died on the sixth day (Friday) and resurrected on the eighth day (Sunday), which is now the first day—the new beginning. The first and the eighth day stand outside of time where we are brought up to God’s Kingdom and Christ is revealed as the Alpha and the Omega (A + Ω). For this reason, the Liturgy is celebrated on Sunday. He also appeared to His disciples on the first day (John 20:19) and then again on the eighth day (John 20: 26). Schmemmann explains that this idea of a new day (i.e. the eighth day) appears in late Jewish apocalyptic writings and formed the basis for the Christian Sunday.<sup>256</sup> The Fathers therefore, recognized the hidden mysteries of these days in the Transfiguration event which in itself is the experience of the light on the eighth day.

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<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357-358.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>253</sup> St. Andrew of Crete also makes reference that the number six is the perfect integer below ten, meaning that the number six is the sum of its proper divisors (i.e. 1, 2, and 3), and he compares this to “Christ, the Wisdom and the Power of God” (1 Cor 1:21) ...who created all in six days.”. C.f. *Homily on the Transfiguration of Christ*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 187. The symbolism of numbers is frequent among early Christian writers. This interest was an integral aspect of culture of the times and was not limited only to the Fathers. C.f. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT II, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 110, Note 1.

<sup>254</sup> ORIGEN, *Commentary on Matthew*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 55.

<sup>255</sup> St. Ambrose, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT III, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 159.

<sup>256</sup> Alexander SCHMEMMANN. *For the Life of the World*, [...], p. 51.

St. Maximus provides us with additional insight into this mystery; not necessarily referring to the Transfiguration explicitly but it is arguably implied. When God completed His creation in six days, He saw that it was “good” and likewise, St. Maximus equates these six days to man’s ascetic struggle; to reach the end of the visible created ‘good’ in a spiritual way, “He who in a divine way has fulfilled the sixth day through the works and thoughts that are appropriate and himself with God has completed well his work, ... he has passed in his mind all hypostasis which is subject to nature and time. And he is transported to the mystical contemplation of the ages of ages...And he who is made worthy of the eighth day is risen from the dead...[and] becomes God through divinization...The mystery of the eighth day lies even beyond the level of likeness. It rests, as it were, in the naked reciprocity of God and man.”<sup>257</sup> The mosaic of the Transfiguration at Sinai (See Appendix II, figure 5), clearly shows the correlation of days, as there are six figures, and eight rays of light emanating from Christ.

The brilliance of the composition of the traditional iconographic representation of the Transfiguration is precisely this reciprocity that is attainable by the pure in heart. *Perfect* reciprocity is *perfect* vision—face to face—and yet it baffles the eyes of the soul who nonetheless receive this ‘perfection’ to be unending from ‘glory to glory’. In the icon, this is represented by the prophets who are not agonizing from the light of God, but looking at Jesus unimpededly. The Transfiguration is therefore, a model of authentic spirituality, through the relentless, vigorous, intentional, and demonstrative effort to reciprocate God’s kenosis; climbing the ‘high mountain’ and daring to ‘challenge’ the Almighty Creator; to equate impossibly His kenotic movement towards man, and this, with the grace that *He Himself* provides as armor for the fight as if He wishes to be defeated by a miniscule creature.

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<sup>257</sup> Lars THUNBERG. *Man and the Cosmos*, [...], p. 63.

### 4.1.3 The High Mountain

*“If there is no adversary, there is no crown. There is no victory unless there is conquest.”*<sup>258</sup>

*-St. Gregory of Nyssa*

The ‘high mountain’ has been given different meanings according to the Fathers. One of them is a reference to the ascetic struggle man needs to perform in order to get to the ‘vision of Light’. Archamandrite Aimilianos presents us with a seemingly strange description of how a person becomes transfigured by alluding to the passage, “The Kingdom of God suffereth violence and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12). He says that a “puny human being...[cannot] storm the gates of heaven, lay siege to God, conquer God” and thus he arms himself with the weapon of prayer, where he can “wrestle with God and defeat him.”<sup>259</sup> He emphasizes that if man does not feel this struggle, he has not begun to pray, but if he does, then “the only options are for me to be knocked down, covered in blood, or to beat him, and hear him say... “Now you’ve won” ... he surrenders himself to me as he did to all the saints.”<sup>260</sup> This is a strange metaphor, but what he is implying is that man must be prepared to sacrifice whatever it takes to be transfigured, for this is the goal of the Christian life. Similarly, Archmandrite George of Mount Athos likens this struggle to the efforts of man to overcome the first stages of deification called “praxis” (i.e. purification), where “Great and ceaseless violence towards ourselves is needed...”<sup>261</sup> We also see this in the case of Jacob who wrestles with God (Gen. 32: 24-30) indicating that seeing God face to face entails a climb—a fight.

Deification is therefore, a journey of perfecting which is unending and will continue in the next life as the Apostle says, “But we all, with *open face* beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from *glory to glory*, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Cor 3:18). This passage contains very deep mysteries for the Christian truth-seeker and it resonates from the depth of the Transfiguration experience with major ramifications for contemporary man. We will explore it once again when we conclude this essay.

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<sup>258</sup> Jean DANÉLIOU. *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s mystical writings*, [...], p. 83.

<sup>259</sup> Archmandrite AIMILIANOS. *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, [...], p. 16.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>261</sup> Archmandrite GEORGE. *The Deification as the Purpose of Man’s Life*, [...], p. 39.

One of the most known quotes from St. Gregory of Nyssa, is his commentary referring precisely to this passage of St. Paul which affords us greater insight,

In truth the finest aspect of our mutability is the possibility of growth in good; and this capacity for improvement transforms the soul, as it changes, more and more into the divine. And so...what appears so terrifying can really be a pinion in our flight towards higher things ... let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being *transformed from glory to glory*, and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, ... never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation.<sup>262</sup>

This passage is tied to the other of St. Paul (mentioned above) that now we see in a “mirror, dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor 13:12).

What “appears so terrifying” was also experienced by the Apostles on Tabor, for they were “greatly afraid”, precisely because their vision of God was *real*, therefore through Peter’s acknowledgement that it was “good” for them to be there, we can come to better understand the link between terror (fear) and joy.

We witness this link in Psalm 2. If we read it with the Transfiguration in mind, we can reflect differently upon its meaning, “The kings of the earth set themselves...Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion...the Lord hath said unto me, Thou *art* my Son; this day have I begotten thee...Be wise now oh ye kings...Serve the Lord with *fear*, and *rejoice* with trembling.” Although the usual patristic reference to the “Son” is that of Christ, Methodius also interprets it to be a “birth in those who come to know God”<sup>263</sup> thus referring to the deification of man, and therefore, the only way a person can truly serve the Lord with fear and joy is if they are transfigured. This is also reflected in the well-known vision of Christ by St. Symeon, where he describes the incredible tender love and gentleness he felt by the presence of the Lord, and that from this day forth Symeon is regarded as his “brother”.

In his 13<sup>th</sup> Hymn, St. Symeon, remarks about the experience of fear, “I cry, I am pierced with sorrow, when the light shines on me and I see my poorness, and realize where I am ...A

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<sup>262</sup> Jean DANIELIOU. *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's mystical writings*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001, p. 52.

<sup>263</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), Old Testament VII, Psalms 1-50, [...], p. 11.

frightening thing indeed, Master, awesome beyond all words, that I behold the light which the world does not have.”<sup>264</sup>

Fr. Boris Bobrinskoy emphasizes that climbing the ‘high mountain’ is having the courage to face ourselves and the challenges of the world,

To sustain the vision, the drama, the reality of suffering, all of us are compelled to find the true method, the strength, and the grace not to harden or destroy ourselves when faced with it ... Sooner or later, we must serve our apprenticeship in accepting and assuming our own suffering, climbing a path to God through it ... [by] grounding ourselves on the one who has taken upon Himself not merely our sin, but also our suffering.”<sup>265</sup>

This is the call of the Apostle to pass from our ‘childish ways’ and to put all things aside so that we can pray truly and return to ourselves. Archamandrite Aimilianos emphasizes that no matter what challenges man faces, he must endure the climb, for a believer is “filled with light”<sup>266</sup> when he is accustomed to prayer and “the joy of Christ is granted... [thus], if you’re sad when you’re praying, if you’re depressed, then something inside you isn’t right.”<sup>267</sup> We are thus called to have an eschatological vision of life and position our sufferings within our own personal historical and eschatological vision. The Transfiguration can only make sense to us in this context.

The Passion and the Cross of Christ remind us of the struggle needed to be deified. As we mentioned earlier, the Fathers say that the Cross is the “gateway of all mysteries” (See Note 19). Fr. John Behr takes a similar historical approach to this suffering. While we are moving towards God, we can discover the truth by “looking backwards to the Cross as the last publicly visible image of him in this world” to uncover the Church in the Old Testament and prepare ourselves “to meet him in the meal to which he invites us...”<sup>268</sup> Although Fr. John is speaking from an eschatological perspective, in the here and now, the transfiguration is revealed before that meal for the saints who are deified. This

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<sup>264</sup> C.f. Archbishop Basil KRIVOCHINE. *In the Light of Christ*, [...], p. 228.

<sup>265</sup> Boris BOBRINSKOY. *The Compassion of the Father*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003, p. 85-86.

<sup>266</sup> Archmandrite AIMILIANOS. *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart*, [...], p. 54.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.* p. 55.

<sup>268</sup> John BEHR. *The Mystery of Christ*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2006, p. 145.

provides us with further insight why the Elevation of the Cross is a Major Feast of the Eastern Church and a joyful one, as it is a way towards the mystery of Christ on Tabor and it is also celebrated exactly forty days after the Transfiguration.<sup>269</sup>

This is beautifully reflected in the mosaic of St. Apollinaris in Classe, Ravenna, Italy (See Appendix II, figure 6) which is dedicated to the post-apocalyptic glory of Christ. Most scholars have identified this mosaic as a depiction of the Transfiguration.<sup>270</sup> In this icon, we see Christ in the middle of the Cross, with six sheep on either side of St. Apollinaris symbolizing the twelve disciples. The prophets are also there, and interestingly, we see the ‘cloud’ and hand of the Father also depicted; something that is omitted from the current traditional iconographic form. As Fr. Andreas elaborates, this is an eschatological scene following the Apocalypse of Peter where we see depicted the garden of trees and fruit (i.e. the garden of Eden) that were shown to the apostles.<sup>271</sup>

There is also an interesting detail on the mosaic icon of the Transfiguration in Sinai (Appendix II, figure 4). Above Christ’s head, there is a cross flanked by the twelve disciples equally on either side. This icon is dated almost 100 years after that of St. Apollinaris’ icon, but the similarity of form is obvious. Another similar mosaic with the cross as the focal point of the icon, flanked again by the Apostles depicted as sheep is the mosaic in the Basilica of San Clemente Rome (See Appendix II, figure 9). Although it was built approximately 700 years after that of St. Appollinaris, its influence is clear.

Another meaning of the ‘high mountain’ is that it represents an elevation of God’s divine nature as compared to man’s created nature. St. Gregory Palamas remarks in his 34<sup>th</sup> Homily, “those who have been established in His faith, men like Peter, James and John, ...were first brought up a high mountain ... above the lowliness of our nature. That is why God is imagined to be on a mountain, coming down from His heights and leading us up from the depths of our abasement.”<sup>272</sup> For this reason, partly, Christ tells the three Apostles, not to say anything of the

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<sup>269</sup> The August 6<sup>th</sup> feast day of the Transfiguration may also be explained by the commemoration of the defeat of the Ottoman Turks at Belgrade on July 22, 1456, set by pope Callistus III, where the news of the victory only reached Rome on August 6<sup>th</sup>. C.f. Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005, p. 65.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119-120.

<sup>272</sup> St. Gregory Palamas. *The Homilies*, [...], p. 269.

event, for the world was not yet ready for the ‘eighth’ day. In Luke 8:49-56, (right before the Transfiguration), Jesus takes the *same three disciples* (i.e. who are ready to see the mysteries) into the house where he raises the girl from the dead, and again, he commands them to tell no one.

#### 4.1.4 The Three Apostles

As we mentioned above, passing from “flesh to spirit” requires an eschatological vision of life and of the entire creation. In the words of Archmandrite Vasileios above, the Light of God “penetrates everything” and therefore an authentic spirituality is an invitation to all, as its effects are far-reaching and cosmic. The Lord chose only three disciples to witness this event and not all twelve, but despite this, they represent all of humanity who can now behold God ‘face to face’. The climb, however, is necessary.

Why only Peter, James, and John? Firstly, we need to remember that one of the disciples was Judas—the betrayer. Philagothos (Monk of Rossano) says, “He did not take all the disciples, since Judas, the most avaricious disciple, was among them, and it was not right that the light of divinity be seen by blemished eyes ...for if the three chosen disciples ...cowered with fear and fell headlong on the ground...what would the betrayer have been likely to feel?”<sup>273</sup>

Nikitas Stithatos who was the disciple and biographer of St. Symeon the New Theologian, says, these three represent, faith, hope, and love, “For those who like Peter [was] advanced in faith, and like James have been restored in hope, and like John have achieved perfection in love...”<sup>274</sup> What is also interesting with his writings is that he calls the transfiguration, the “pure teaching” that “shines upon them as the sun”<sup>275</sup> and, later, also calls this the “mountain of contemplation” that is given to those only “whose eye has been opened.”<sup>276</sup> He does not say “eyes” but “eye” thus referring to the Self-Seeing Eye of the soul as we explained above.

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<sup>273</sup> Philagothos, *Homily 31, On the Saving Transfiguration*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 265-266.

<sup>274</sup> The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volumes IV*, [...], p. 155.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Chrysostom also says, “they were superior to the others! Peter ...in the intensity of his love; John ...by being loved intensely; James...by his answer ...we can drink this cup.”<sup>277</sup> He also mentions that the chosen Apostles were there so that not only can they learn from the example of Elijah and Moses, but can surpass them, “to become gentle like Moses, impassioned like Elijah, careful guardians like both of them.”<sup>278</sup> Despite the honour bestowed upon the prophets, Chrysostom says that the difference with the Apostles is that He brought them forth in glory, for even though Moses was “perfect”, the Apostles would be “held to a higher standard”.<sup>279</sup> The Apostles were to be called not to simply “go out of Egypt but to spar with the devil.”<sup>280</sup> The ecstasy of the vision of light was to prepare them to become fearless in the face of death. Similarly, Origen says that Jesus was preparing them to “put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light”<sup>281</sup> This is the Providence of God that was shown to the Apostles when Christ revealed His glory; not only for them to understand that His Passion would be voluntary, but so they can accept their own sufferings.

What is interesting in this regard, is that after the raising of the girl from the dead, another important event occurs prior to the Apostles being led up the ‘high mountain’. They were gathered by Christ and he gave them power and authority to cure diseases, and He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Luke 9:1-6). This ability to heal is no small feat, yet, despite that there is evidence that all twelve disciples were given the power of the Holy Spirit to the degree akin to what we typically see in the pre-Pentecost Old Testament, nonetheless, only the same three Apostles were ready (spiritually) to endure the ‘terror’ that would behold them on Mount Tabor giving us an indication of the high level of struggle that is needed to reach the vision of God. In addition, this lends further weight to the writings of St. Gregory that this light is not natural created light, but something uncreated and divine; something he emphasizes repeatedly in his *Homily 34* on the Transfiguration.

This contrast of the ‘lower’ healings and miracles performed by the Apostles which involves earthly time and space and the Transfiguration which is beyond this world, is also reflected in the

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<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>278</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 56 on Matthew*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 73.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.



fact that Christ told them not to reveal what they had seen on Tabor. This is shown on the right side of the icon where Christ is descending the mountain with the Apostles. When Christ Himself performed earthly miracles, He was accused of being a “demon”. How much more would the vision of Light, if claimed to be seen by the Apostles, be blasphemous to unbelievers? St. Ephrem, explains that it is only when they would “receive power”, meaning the Holy Spirit, (Acts 1:8) that they would then be given the grace they need, “when you will speak and they will not believe, you will raise the dead for their confusion and your own glory.”<sup>282</sup>

St. Symeon the New Theologian explains that although the vision of God is a free gift of grace, it would be “unendurable to those who lack faith...If it manifested itself or came to show itself to someone unexpectedly, this would be something awesome and terrible.”<sup>283</sup> In Theophanes’ icon, (Appendix II, Figure 2) we see the Apostles in varying positions according to their capacity to endure and the measure to which they have attained spiritually. St. Gregory says that “Grace is communicated to all worthy of it, in a way proper and *peculiar* [my emphasis] to each one, while the divine essence transcends all that is participable.”<sup>284</sup>

This “unexpected” terrible vision and certainly a most “peculiar” account of the vision of light is what happened to St. Paul on the road to Damascus, who was sent to persecute the Christians. Although he was very advanced in knowledge, he did not know Christ. But when Christ spoke to him, he confessed Him as the “Lord” that was speaking to him in this light. This vision was terrible for Paul and consequently he was blinded by the simple presence of God by virtue of him being a persecutor of men, and God. We know that what followed for St. Paul was that he did not eat or drink for three days until he received the Holy Ghost from Ananias (Acts 9: 9-10).

How can we explain the obvious fact that Paul seemingly did not climb the ‘high mountain’ and was still granted the gift of the vision of Light? When we consider, however, that he was blinded and didn’t eat or drink for three days, it seems like he did climb the mountain but in *reverse*. According to St. John Chrysostom, God Himself brought Paul to the faith and taught him directly, and that the three days of blindness was for him to believe that He resurrected after

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<sup>282</sup> St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT III*, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 161.

<sup>283</sup> Archbishop Basil KRIVOCHEINE. *In the Light of Christ*, [...], p. 204.

<sup>284</sup> Gregory PALAMAS. *The Triads* [...], p. 85.

three days and that he can come to know the mystery of Christ.<sup>285</sup> This is only fitting for Paul, as Jesus also taught the other Apostles directly. St. Paul immediately began his ministry after he was baptized by Ananias by preaching in the synagogues that Christ is the Son of God (Acts 9:20), showing himself to be the “chosen vessel” (Acts 9:15) who had indeed climbed the high mountain. Paul was being purified during these three days and in his “peculiarity”, that is, his advanced knowledge, he became the vessel of God to expand Christianity. Therefore, we have to remember that Paul was indeed a *long-standing* believer; Hand-picked by God while he was already climbing indeed, but climbing the wrong mountain.

When Ananias touched him and the Holy Spirit filled Paul, the scales from his eyes fell. This is another “peculiarity” of Paul, whereas the Apostles were also blinded but without scales. From patristic writings, we gather that due to the fact that he was a persecutor of God—unlike the spiritual advancement (in Christ) of the three Apostles—these scales seem to have been added to his eyes for protection, as the scriptural passage says that his eyes were “opened” but he could not see (Acts 9: 8-9). St. John Chrysostom likens these scales and his blindness to the law (i.e. Old Testament), where his sight was restored (i.e. unto Christ) after Ananias touched him and the scales fell off his eyes.<sup>286</sup> Bede connects these scales to the Law with an interesting metaphor, “the Jews were called ““serpents and a brood of vipers”, this man, who had been an eager follower of their faith, covered over the eyes of his heart, so to speak, with a serpent’s skin.”<sup>287</sup>

The importance of this brief outline of Paul’s conversion above, serves as perhaps the best ‘proof’ that the Light of Christ is awesome, terrible, true, and *divine* as it flipped Paul over like a coin. Paul received the “light of knowledge in his heart” and the “glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” and he likened this to the “treasure” he maintains perpetually within himself (2 Cor 4:6-7). This real deifying experience of God is what gave him the courage to stand before the persecutors—a group, and whose methods, he was no stranger to.

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<sup>285</sup> C.f. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament V, Acts (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 105-106.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4.1.5 The Prophets

Chrysostom says that God didn't just bring anyone to the scene, but Moses and Elijah, "the leading prophets there", so the Apostles could be convinced that He is the fulfillment of the Law against those who accused Him of "transgressing the law...and to encourage Peter and the others who were in dread of suffering, and raise their thoughts higher."<sup>288</sup> He also wanted his disciples to imitate their ability to lead, for He brought Moses and Elijah "forth in glory...not that they (i.e. the disciples) might come up to their measure and rest, but that they might surpass it."<sup>289</sup>

Elijah and Moses look directly at Christ. Moses holds the Law (Old Testament) indicating that Christ is the fulfillment of that Law. Moses and Elijah were also previously transfigured; Moses when he went up Mount Sinai and Elijah when he went up Mount Carmel. This is why they are standing on three separate mountains. However, they both wished to see the Lord which was denied to them as they were addressing the person of God the Father. Now through the Incarnation of God, their request is fulfilled as they can see the glory of God the Father through Jesus who is one with His Father. Emperor Leo VI (Leo the Wise) says that the prophets were there because they are "the two summits of history before grace, whom heaven miraculously served..."<sup>290</sup>

St. Ephrem says that the prophets appeared beside Him "so that they might know that he was the Lord of the prophets."<sup>291</sup> St. Jerome says that Christ reveals to be the Master of all, "for Elijah descends from the place he ascended, and Moses rose from the lower regions."<sup>292</sup> Elijah therefore represents the living; Moses represents the dead which is another hint that this icon is closely linked to the Resurrection. In the icon of the Resurrection (See Appendix II, figure 8), the resemblance to the Transfiguration is evident in the white clothes of Christ and the mandorla, and as well in the overall composition. In this case, Adam and Eve are replaced by Peter, James, and John and there is a general lower and higher level in both icons, and a "directional flow from

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<sup>288</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 56 on Matthew*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 71-72.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>290</sup> Leo the Wise, *Homily 39*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], p. 256.

<sup>291</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT III, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 160.

<sup>292</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT 1b, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 54.

the figures in the lower tier towards Christ.”<sup>293</sup> Cullman provides an interesting connection with Hellenistic thought, which conceived of life “spatially” as “below and an above” as opposed to the Bible of “present” and “future”.<sup>294</sup>

#### 4.1.6 The Tabernacles

“Not knowing what he was saying”, Peter suggested to Jesus that they should honor Him by building three separate tabernacles around Him and the prophets (See Appendix I). There are a few interpretations of this passage that require some analysis.

Origen interprets Peter’s comment as a temptation,<sup>295</sup> that they should build three tents and stay on the mountain instead of returning to the world where Christ would fulfil His mission. This view, however, is not supported by many of the Fathers and by scripture as well. The most quoted scriptural passage by the Fathers is that of St. Paul, who being transfigured by the vision of light and taken to the “third heaven” had a “desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.” (Phil 1:23). This passage is reflected directly or indirectly by many Fathers. St. Ambrose is one example, who quotes Paul directly, and explains that Peter did not know what to say because of the beauty of what he saw, and that Peter’s comment was simply his “untimely zeal”.<sup>296</sup> St. Ambrose also mentions that the Apostles were “heavy with sleep” precisely because of the overwhelming experience of the light beyond the perceptions of the body.<sup>297</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius provides further insight: “The sleep of God refers to the divine transcendence and to the inability of the objects of his providential care to communicate directly with him.”<sup>298</sup>

Therefore, this experience of the Apostles was positive, not negative, which is in line with everything we have presented in this essay thus far. If we believe that the Transfiguration of Christ was the revelation of His glory, then the experience can only be taken in a positive sense, otherwise it would not have been an authentic vision of God.

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<sup>293</sup> Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, [...], p. 163.

<sup>294</sup> C.f. John MEYENDORFF. *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, [...], p. 111.

<sup>295</sup> *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, , [...], p. 61-63.

<sup>296</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, NT III, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 160.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the AREOPAGITE. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, [...], p. 288.

In this wonderful passage by St. Gregory of Sinai, he basically sums up the Transfiguration without referring to it directly,

The Kingdom of Heaven is like the tabernacle which was built by God, and which He disclosed to Moses as a pattern ... for it too had an inner and an outer sanctuary. Into the first will enter all who are priests of grace. But into the second—which is noetic—will enter only those who in this life have attained the divine darkness of theological wisdom...entering into the tabernacle that Jesus Himself has set up...where He acts as their consecrator before the Trinity, and illumines them even more richly with His own splendour ...for although the kingdom of heaven is one, there are many different levels within it...there is a place for both heavenly and earthy men according to their virtue, their knowledge and the degree of deification that they have attained.<sup>299</sup>

These are amazing words of hope for the Christian believer and makes it clear that the measure of authentic spirituality is the Light of Christ, and whatever measure was obtained in this life will simply continue in the next as we mentioned above, but the important thing is to be *on* the path towards the Light. However, even for those that are in the outer level, it is no small task—to become a “priest of grace”. The difference in ‘levels’ is reflected in the icon by the different postures of the Apostles and their tolerance to the light according to their measure of spirituality. A depiction of ‘agitation’ in iconography as we see in the Transfiguration icon, is meant to portray a state of ‘sinfulness’, or rather a ‘lack of perfection’. As we mentioned earlier, a side-profile, is an absence of God.

A very interesting perspective was provided by Fr. Andreas Andreopoulos on the saying of Peter that requires further analysis based on the study of Harry Riesenfeld (1947) who connects this offer of Peter to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, or *Sukkot*.<sup>300</sup> Riesenfeld concluded from his research that the Transfiguration event is a continuation and completion of the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>301</sup> Sukkot is often called THE feast in Judaic literature.<sup>302</sup> This is an important fact, as many Fathers also refer to “*the feast*” when writing about the tabernacles which we will see later. The building of tents during this feast is to remind them of their journey through the

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<sup>299</sup> The Philokalia: *The Complete Text, Volume IV*, [...], p. 220.

<sup>300</sup> Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, [...], p. 56-57.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>302</sup> C.f. <https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/the-meaning-of-the-feast-of-tabernacles/> page consulted on 2018-12-20).

wilderness where eventually they would find a permanent home. Observance of the feast is for seven days of this eight-day feast, and the eighth day is the enthronement of the Messiah and mystical king”<sup>303</sup>

Fr. Andreas concludes firstly, that the Fathers did not sufficiently explore the connection between the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles and the Transfiguration, and that Peter’s comment to build tents, can only make sense in this context.<sup>304</sup> Secondly, he adds that for the Fathers, Peter’s offer to make three tents was incomprehensible to them and the Fathers can only conclude that Peter was “drunk from the excitement of the moment or that an evil spirit had taken possession of him!”<sup>305</sup>

This later point of view of “possession”, we have already dispelled as inconsistent with most patristic writings, but it is perhaps harsh to say that the Fathers portray Peter as “drunk from excitement”, implying a state of passion for the disciple who confessed Him as Lord! If anything, the Fathers say the opposite; the Apostles found themselves in *passivity of ecstasy*, as the Apostles were selected for their spiritual advancement and the vision of light was a reality check—a return to themselves—and a vision of the world to come, the eighth day; an experience of deification where their eyes were forever altered. Peter, rather, simply found himself before the awesome God and he could not put in words what he saw, nor could the knowledge of his prior confession of Christ as Lord—revealed to him by God the Father—could have prepared him for such a thing, so he “did not know what he was saying”.

To further prove this, we’ll return to the idea of ‘sleep’, where the Fathers also use this same explanation for the ‘sleep’ the Apostles experienced in Luke’s version. St. Ambrose explains, “Peter saw this grace ...although they were heavy with sleep. The incomprehensible magnificence of the Godhead overwhelms the perceptions of our body. If the sharpness of bodily vision cannot bear the ray of the sun directly into watching eyes, how may the corruption of human members endure the glory of God?”<sup>306</sup> Based on what Daniélou says, St. Gregory of Nyssa provides the most compelling explanation of Peter’s vision. Daniélou refers to two

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<sup>303</sup> Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, [...], p. 58.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>306</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT III*, (Thomas C. Oden, editor), [...], p. 160.

passages from Acts relating to Peter. Firstly, “For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it but the third hour of the day.” (Acts 2:15), and secondly, “And he [Peter] became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance.” (Acts 10:10). These passages would suggest the ecstatic vision of Peter to the *transcendent*, not simply that of being “drunk with excitement”, as Fr. Andreas is suggesting. Daniélou explains that Gregory makes a clear distinction “between ecstasy and inebriation [i.e. intoxication].”<sup>307</sup> He describes this ecstasy as the “incomprehensibility of the divine nature and not merely the inability of man to understand supernatural reality.”<sup>308</sup> In Gregory’s *Commentary on the Canticle*, specifically, Cant. 5.2 (I sleep and my heart watcheth), the passage on inebriation is “immediately followed by a discussion of sleep ...For sleep is, in the strict sense, a kind of pathos ...where the mind is under the control of the imagination.”<sup>309</sup> However, the sleep we are referring to is “superior to being awake,”<sup>310</sup> explains Daniélou, and this is the experience of the Apostles on Tabor. Gregory continues in his *Commentary* that, “When all of [the senses] have been lulled into inactivity by a kind of sleep, the heart’s functioning becomes pure, the reason looks up to heaven, unshaken and unperturbed by the motion of the senses...After lulling to sleep every bodily motion, it receives the vision of God in a divine wakefulness with pure and naked intuition.”<sup>311</sup> This commentary by St. Gregory provides us with great insight into the mystery of the Transfiguration event and to what the Apostles in fact actually experienced.

We’ll conclude on this issue with a concise and excellent passage from John of Damascus who only has to ask us one question to help us reflect on Peter’s words, and the deeper mysteries of the Taboric Light. He asks, “Who would take darkness in exchange for light?...there is no reason or desire that can calculate the measure by which it [the Light] surpasses what we know...What Peter says is not foolishness!”<sup>312</sup> Therefore we must be careful and cognisant that the beautiful Apostle who confessed Christ as “Lord” did not “know what to say” because *no created human* can put into words what he saw—the divine, and it is precisely because of his spiritual beauty that he is the only one in all synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration that *dares to speak* during

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<sup>307</sup> Jean DANIELIOU. *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s mystical writings*, [...], p. 37.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, [...], p. 225.

this frightening event; raising our minds further to surpass his prior confession of Jesus as the Messiah. This adds further credence that the rays of light are uncreated (i.e. divine), and that the deification of man is indeed possible, as these were not words spoken within the dimension of finite space and time according to the Fathers.

In regards to the comment of Peter about the tabernacles, Fr. Andreas' claim that the Fathers did not make an explicit reference to the connection of the two feasts is not entirely true. The connection is definitely implied in many patristic writings, and perhaps it is so obvious, that the majority of Fathers needed not make an explicit connection as there are numerous scriptural passages implying this connection in any case<sup>313</sup>.

The most explicit is given to us by the *Lord Himself*. During the Feast of Tabernacles, countless daily water ceremonies occurred, and led by the High Priest. On the last day of the Feast (i.e. the eighth day), Jesus Himself said that He is the Messiah that should be enthroned once and for all, "In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his *belly shall flow rivers of living water*." (John 7: 37-38). Almost immediately following this event, Christ humiliates all those who wanted to stone the woman to death, and having exposed all to be sinners—*except for Himself*, as He had the power to forgive her—He says, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8: 12). Thus, Jesus Himself here makes the connection between the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Transfiguration, where all sinners climb the mountain to receive the light and whoever achieves the climb, shall himself possess "rivers of living water" (i.e. be deified in the Holy Spirit). There is no denying this obvious connection.

St. Gregory of Nyssa in writing about the Holy of Holies, also makes an *explicit* connection to Sukkot and Christ in that He shows Himself to be the High Priest of the Altar that was forbidden. Although he is writing about the "soul and the resurrection" following the death of his brother St. Basil, he makes mention of "the feast" as being connected with the Resurrection, not the Transfiguration *per se*. However, as we mentioned earlier, the Transfiguration is closely linked to the Resurrection, and the Second Coming which is the first Resurrection revealed to all, and

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<sup>313</sup> See Mark 14:58, Col 2:11, Heb 9:24, Heb 9:24, 2 Cor 5:1, Acts 7:48-49, Acts 17:24, Acts 19:26.



clearly portrayed in the similarity of the iconographic forms we mentioned earlier. St. Gregory writes,

The Feast of Tabernacle-fixing, which in accord with Moses' injunction, has been observed from of old...[the prophet], predicted therein things still to come ...one single feast is to be kept by the whole rational creation, and that in that assembly of the saints the inferiors are to join the dance with their superiors ...whenever the time comes that the tabernacle of our nature is as it were to be fixed up again in the Resurrection, ...then a universal feast will be kept around the Deity by those who have decorated themselves in the Resurrection ...one festival of united voices shall occupy us all; that festival shall be the confession and the recognition of the Being Who truly is.<sup>314</sup>

If we read this passage with either the Transfiguration or the Resurrection in mind, it still makes perfect sense, as those who are “decorated” are the “deified” who have seen the Taboric Light.

St. Anastasius of Sinai provides us perhaps with the *most ecstatic homily* on the Transfiguration event where one reading is not enough. He makes a clear connection between the Transfiguration and the Feast of Tabernacles, “...the *mystic festivals* [my emphasis], the celebrations that bring us to God ...with his [Peter] eyes enlightened and opened, he saw, as much as it is possible to see, those dwelling-places and tabernacles on high...”<sup>315</sup> He then affords us a fascinating and unique detail in regards to Christ's self-proclamation that He alone is the “light of the world” and that He is the fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles. Likely referring to the mosaic of the Transfiguration (See Appendix II, figure 5)<sup>316</sup> he says, “To see him raising his immaculate finger in the direction of his own face, *pointing* [my emphasis] with it, and saying to those with him there: “So shall the just shine in the resurrection: so shall they be glorified, changed to reveal this form of mine, *transfigured* [my emphasis] to this level of glory.””<sup>317</sup>. Similarly, the icon also shows the prophets pointing to the direction of Christ as well—something that St. Anastasius curiously does not mention.

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<sup>314</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, V 5, (Philip Schaff, editor), [...], p. 460 - 461.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169-170.

<sup>316</sup> Figure 4 and figure 5 are the same icon but figure 4 provides a clearer view of the Cross and the twelve Apostles from a ground up, and figure 5 provides us with a clear eye-level view.

<sup>317</sup> Anastasius of Sinai, *Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, [...], p. 176.

Finally, St. Gregory of Nyssa, again, elaborates on the ‘tabernacle’ in the classic, *The Life of Moses*, in his chapter on the “Heavenly Tabernacle”.<sup>318</sup> He clearly explains that Christ is the Heavenly Tabernacle, “who in his own nature was not made with hands, yet capable of being made when it became necessary for this tabernacle to be erected among us.”<sup>319</sup> The connection to the tabernacle ‘not made with hands’, and the scriptural passages we provided above in Note 312 is obvious.

#### 4.1.7 The Mandorla

*“And the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.”*

*-John 1:5.*

*“...thou art clothed...in majesty...who coverest thyself with light as with a garment...”*

*-Psalm 104:1-2.*

The mandorla around Christ represents His majesty, the Kingdom of God, His *glory* or as Lossky explains, the “*kabod*, or in the Septuagint: δόξα), which both reveals and dissimulates the presence of God.”<sup>320</sup> Although there are different forms of the mandorla (i.e. round and oval), scholars agree that it is a representation of the Jewish concept of the *kabod* of God.<sup>321</sup> The round mandorla in particular (See Appendix II, figure 3) has been shown through scholarly evidence to descend from the *imago clipeata*, the Roman tradition of depicting persons of honor such as emperors<sup>322</sup> and is typically used in Christian icons to depict the ‘place of God’. Whereas the oval mandorla (See Appendix II, figures 2, 5, 8 in particular), is used to represent the glory or the splendour of God.<sup>323</sup>

The Gospel of Luke says, “The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or, lo there! for, behold the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21). If the Kingdom of God is therefore within us, then this would suggest that we need to start by looking interiorly in order to find it. The Apostles on Mount Tabor witnessed the Light of Christ externally—and interiorly to a limited extent as this was a pre-Pentecost event—but now through

<sup>318</sup> St. Gregory of NYSSA. *The Life of Moses*, Mahwah, N.J., Paulist Press, 1978, p. 97.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>320</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Vision of God*, [...], p. 23.

<sup>321</sup> C.f. Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, [...], p. 84.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God, which is represented by the mandorla around Christ, can be completely experienced interiorly and man can be elevated to the stature of Elijah and Moses who see God ‘face-to-face (Num 12:8). “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:33). According to Archmandrite George, “The Kingdom of God is deification, the acquisition of the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit.”<sup>324</sup>

The mandorla is a representation of man’s providential journey fleshed out from the “belly” of the saints: from *darkness to light, to darkness once again*, and this eternally from *glory to glory*. Lossky says, “it is by *unknowing* (αγνωστω) that we may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge...ascending from inferior degrees...to the highest...progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.”<sup>325</sup>

The Light of God is perceived as darkness in patristic writings because it is not natural created light. As we mentioned earlier, the color blue is often used in iconography to represent the darkness or unknowability of God, or the ‘abyss’ of God. For this reason, the oval mandorla typically is a darker blue moving closer to the center, meaning, the closer man gets to God, the deeper his perception of this abyss which is unending (See Appendix II, figure 8). The Fathers typically say that what is required to enter further is humility. St. Isaac hints that the extreme Humility of God can only be reached by the necessary humility of the onlooker, “Perception of God is an abyss of humility.”<sup>326</sup> This helps us to understand a little further what the opening passage above of St. John means when he says, the “darkness comprehended it not”.

The masterpiece icon of the Transfiguration by Theophanes the Greek (Appendix II, figure 2) brilliantly depicts this ‘darkness’ of light in many ways, other than the obvious mandorla. Firstly, in the two top corners of the icon, the prophets are replicated but surrounded in a blue ‘cloud’ which, as we have already mentioned, is the colour of divinity and the usual colour for the ‘darkness’ of God. In each of these clouds, in the divine blue transcendence of God, the same figure—that of an angel with wings representing the transcendent world—appears to be

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<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>325</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, [...], p. 25.

<sup>326</sup> Saint Isaac the Syrian. *The Ascetical Homilies*, [...], p. 448.

instructing the prophets directly with knowledge. Secondly, the rays of the Light are also the same blue hyacinth colour, and in unique fashion, Theophanes' genius is to show the rays actually penetrating and transfiguring the eyes of the Apostles directly instead of fading into the figures at some obscure point as we see in other icons. Thirdly, the Law, which Moses is holding is blue, intentionally painted in a very translucent way, perhaps to indicate that it was "not written in stone" and that Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. Fourthly, this colour touches all matter, the rocks and clothes of all the figures indicating that it is not natural light. Fifthly, and most importantly, the *inner* garments of all five figures (i.e. the prophets and the Apostles) are the same blue. The most interesting is the tone of blue and the amount of the inner garment that is exposed in each Apostle. Starting with Peter (left figure) who confessed that "it is good to be here", the blue-coloured garment is darker than the middle figure (John) and more exposed than the other two.<sup>327</sup> John has fewer blue highlights than Peter but more than James (right figure).<sup>328</sup> John also is shown with a small part of the blue garment in the rolled-up part of the sleeve on his left arm, which is far less than Peter who is shown with both his arms covered in the blue garment. James clearly has less garment exposed than John, and less blue highlights, and his other arm is covered entirely by the red garment—usually meant as a depiction of reverence. There is a clear intentional spiritual progression here from left to right. From a positional point of view Peter also is gazing up but nonetheless in agony. John looks in the reverse direction in more agony than Peter who is depicted with his hand around his face, and James, cannot bear the light at all and covers his eyes and he is rolled up almost in a ball.

Regardless of the quantity, this common blue color emphasizes the *unity* of their human nature and apostolicity as they possess the same inner garment; the same potentiality to acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit, albeit being in different stages of purification. This argument is even more compelling when we consider that the inner garments of the prophets are exactly the same

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<sup>327</sup> Although Peter's confession is obvious, the question is why John would be placed in the middle position? John wrote the 'spiritual gospel' and although he was the only one of the four evangelists who were actually present at the Transfiguration, he did not explicitly mention the Transfiguration. The reason for this is that the whole Gospel of John is permeating with the 'vision of light', or the spiritual expression of that vision whereas the synoptic Gospels emphasize the divinity of Jesus.

<sup>328</sup> An iconographic technique to portray intensity is the degree of translucency and amount of color used. An enlarged view of this icon makes it very more evident.

in quantity and in intensity of blue color lending more credence that Theophanes is making an intentional distinction in the depiction of the Apostles and their degree of spiritual measure.

As we mentioned above, there is a remarkable connection here to Rublev's Trinity icon (Appendix II, figure 1). Rublev also uses the same hyacinth blue as the *inner* garments of God the Father (left figure), and the Holy Spirit (right figure). The only difference is the middle figure who although is covered with the same blue garment, it is worn on the *outside* and outwardly expanding, which is the kenosis of the Son and further proves the middle figure is Christ. It is difficult to deny that Theophanes' student, Rublev, didn't use the same iconographic technique of the inner garment, and the same tone of blue to depict spiritual ideas. This connection is not so surprising as both themes are *epiphanies*, and the importance of the Holy Spirit is at the forefront in each of these icons since, for both these geniuses, Master and student, there can be no authentic spirituality without the Holy Spirit, and they made sure to make that clear. We outlined above, at least for Rublev, the importance of the Holy Spirit in the context of St. Sergius. The explanation provided by Bunge, of the index finger pointing to the Holy Spirit allows us to revisit this emphasis and make a connection between the two icons. Aesthetically, both these icons reflect the inner qualities of their painters and elevate the soul of the onlooker to aspire to theosis—the goal of the Christian life.

We have shown both the round and oval mandorlas, and Fr. Andreas presents us with a third, the so-called 'egg-shaped' mandorla. He argues that this shape is unique to the mandorla of the Sinai mosaic (Appendix II, figure, 4), where the shape is not exactly oval but, in his words, "narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, resembling the shape of a huge egg, something unique in the history of Transfiguration iconography."<sup>329</sup> Fr. Andreas speculates that this could be Christ "as the new Adam, coming out of it"<sup>330</sup> However, he does not take into account two very important factors; the height of the apse, and its extensive curvature. Figure 4 is almost straight up vertically from the ground where the viewer would perceive the mandorla as 'egg-shaped'. If we look at the same mosaic but at eye-level (Appendix II, figure 5), it is clear that it is not egg-shaped but almost perfectly oval, and the only reason we don't see it as perfectly oval is because we are not at perfect eye-level. Further proof of this illusion caused by perspective is the rays of

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<sup>329</sup> Andreas ANDREOPOULOS. *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, [...], p. 136.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

light emanating from Christ. In figure 4 it seems like the rays are concave upward, whereas at eye-level (i.e. figure 5), they are almost straight. Christ is also more elongated in figure 5 than in figure 4.

It would seem that the creator of the mosaic did not take into consideration the view from the ground up, and perhaps with good reason as the icon from a distance—even at ground level—would be perceived as more oval. It is impossible to take into account all the possible visual perspectives from a spacial point of view, and any attempt to do so would have likely caused a distortion in the appearance of the image at least from one viewer's perspective. In any case, Fr. Andreas' theological reasons for an 'egg-shaped' mandorla are inconsistent with the theology of the Transfiguration and not grounded in scripture in any way or in patristics. He claims that, "the blue colour of the mandorla as the colour of the sky and the universe is consistent with the view of the mandorla as a cosmic egg"<sup>331</sup> and that, "it is possible that the symbolism of the cosmic egg was tried with this icon." Although blue does represent the sky or creation in iconographic symbolism, it is used in the way that we described above. This notion of a "cosmic egg" does not have any hard theological basis.

In regards to the meaning of the Feast of the Transfiguration, Fr. Andreas' remarks that the "theological meaning of the feast has been partially, at least, replaced by the agricultural significance of the end of the summer ...the first-fruits of the earth (grapes in the Greek tradition, and mostly apples in the Russian) ...marking the beginning of the fruit-bearing autumn."

However, the theological meaning has not been "replaced" with this blessing of the first-fruits but rather 'continued' in a natural fashion. Although in the Greek tradition we bless grapes, the first plant to actually blossom in Greece is the *almond* which has a definite scriptural and patristic basis.<sup>332</sup> The word 'mandorla' is Italian for 'almond'. The almond is found in scripture (Num 17:8), where the rod of Aaron blossomed, "And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the *tabernacle of witness* [my emphasis]; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds." The condition for this sign was nothing but Aaron's purity, where the budding, blossoming, and

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136-137.

<sup>332</sup> C.f. <https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2011/01/29/the-mandorla-in-icons-revealing-mystery/> for an interesting essay on the oval mandorla in the form of an almond.

yielding occurring all at the same time is a sign of the transcendent; the mystery of the eighth day. Therefore, the ‘tabernacle of witness’ could be seen as this almond-shaped mandorla.

Just preceding this passage, we learn that Moses, again, “laid up the rods before the Lord in the tabernacle of witness.” (Num 17:7). We saw in the previous section the significance of the ‘tabernacle’ as offered by Peter to the Lord on Mount Tabor. If we peel the outer skin of an almond, it is white reflecting the light of Christ which he concealed under His clothes. St. Anastasius also mentions Num 17:8, “There a staff put forth shoots, here the cross bursts into bloom”<sup>333</sup> making a connection to the Cross which is linked to the Transfiguration as we saw earlier.

Another passage from the psalms (Ps.1:3), is directly related to the Transfiguration, “And he shall be like a tree planted by the *rivers of water*, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.” As we saw earlier, Christ’s words from John 7: 37-38, “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow *rivers of living water*” are the fulfillment of the psalm.

St. Gregory Palamas in his remarkable 53<sup>rd</sup> Homily, *On the Entrance of the Theotokos Into the Holy of Holies*, likens the Virgin Mary as a ‘shoot’ which began with the purity found in her parents, Joachim and Anna,

How spotless their hearts must have been to be able to offer up a prayer so far-reaching and effective! As the fruit of such a vow the Virgin was brought by her parents to the giver, like a beloved votive offering. O finest of couples! O elect pair who cultivated and presented to God a dwelling-place dearer than heaven! She was brought, like a most *holy shoot* [my emphasis] sprung from a holy root, a shoot reaching from earth to heaven, so great was its honor, a shoot which would soon bring forth the pre-eternal, unfading flower...This shoot was led to be planted.<sup>334</sup>

We also see the same purity in Joseph where all the single men were invited to lay a dry stalk on the altar, “When he [Joseph] did bring his rod, and a dove coming from heaven pitched upon the

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<sup>333</sup> St. Anastasius of Sinai: *Homily on the Transfiguration*, Light on the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord, [...], [...], p. 166.

<sup>334</sup> St. Gregory Palamas. *The Homilies*, [...], p. 424.

top of it, every one plainly saw, that the virgin was to be betrothed to him” (Apocryphal James 6, 5).

Another interesting observation is that the oval mandorla is in the shape of a vesical piscis (See Appendix II, figure 10a) which is the intersection of two discs, also called mandorla or ‘almond’ in Italian. The vesical piscis is a type of lens which brings two things together. Therefore, this type of mandorla could represent the coming together of two things as a lens to reveal deeper mysteries, such as: Heaven and Earth, Old Testament and New Testament, Christ’s two natures, or Man and God. All of these are represented in the icon of the Transfiguration. Figure 8 is closer to this pattern of the vesical piscis.

In his 26<sup>th</sup> Homily, St. Gregory provides us with some additional insight into the mysteries of how man is built by reflecting on this *two-fold* paradigm, “He honoured our nature with many and varied gifts. As He gave us two or, more accurately, many faculties for gaining knowledge: our mind, our senses, and what lies between them, He also made all the objects of our knowledge and action twofold and complex [manifold].”<sup>335</sup>

An extended version of the vesical piscis, or the ‘Flower of Life’ (See Appendix II, figure 10b) which is a well-known ‘sacred geometry’, was used by many cultures throughout history. We are not claiming in this essay that there is a link between this pattern and the oval mandorla, as this would require a serious study, however, what is interesting, is that this pattern has been discovered as Christian graffiti in the building of Osireion close to the Abydos temple. Abydos is one of the oldest cities in Egypt. There are multiple patterns of the ‘Flower of Life’ carved in the columns of the temple with the inscription ‘ICXC’ (Jesus Christ).<sup>336</sup> It has been suggested that these markings date to the second or fourth century<sup>337</sup> which predates the Sinai mosaic. We cannot conclude definitely that the oval mandorla at Sinai was derived from the idea of the vesical piscis or the Flower of Life, but if there is a link, perhaps this ancient and well-known

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<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>336</sup> C.f. [http://www.thelighthouseonline.com/images/photos-mine/024\\_21A.JPG](http://www.thelighthouseonline.com/images/photos-mine/024_21A.JPG), and also, <https://hiddenincatours.com/ancient-egypt-the-osirion-and-the-mystery-of-the-flower-of-life-symbols/> (pages consulted on 2018-12-27).

<sup>337</sup> C.f. [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Overlapping\\_circles\\_grid.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Overlapping_circles_grid.html).



pattern was simply a natural fit for the design of the oval mandorla at Sinai given the relative close proximity of the two cities.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

We have attempted in this essay to demonstrate through Scripture and patristic study, that the Transfiguration is the most mystical of experiences that man can endure. Something that is not hidden but within our reach and can only be known empirically and not in a modern use of the word ‘scientifically’. When we use the term ‘scientific’ it would be useful to firstly explore the Greek etymology of the word, *επιστήμη*, or *ἐπίσταμαι* (*epistamai*), which means to know of or understand through sustained personal effort or practice which leads to a tangible familiarity and profound knowledge of the matter.

The spiritual methodology of the Eastern Church is based on the empirical knowledge gained from the early Christian understanding of how a person must climb the ‘high mountain’. Fr. John Romanides often used the example of ‘experience’ as the basis for his arguments, “The person in *theosis* knows exactly and clearly the distinction between the uncreated energies of God and the created energies of the creatures...”<sup>338</sup> He also refers to *theosis* as the core of the Orthodox Tradition which is “handed down from generation to generation by people who, having reached the state of illumination or *theosis*, became therapists for others. We are not talking here simply about knowledge that has been transmitted through books, but about experience...”<sup>339</sup> and the eyes that have this experience, do not see the world in the same way as their vision has been stretched past their worldly dimension and can no longer regain their original scale.

In order to ‘see’ the truth of the Taboric Light, we have to be prepared to set our pre-conceived notions aside and enter the *transcendent* that surpasses the limits of the mind as we have repeatedly indicated in this essay.

In the wake of post-modern thought it is arduous for the honest seeker to find an authentic Christian spirituality as it has penetrated every aspect of contemporary life. Although the

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<sup>338</sup> John ROMANIDES. *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, Rollinsford, NH, Orthodox Research Institute, 2004, p. 113.

<sup>339</sup> John ROMANIDES. *Patristic Theology* [...], p. 41.

definition of post-modernity is large, McGrath provides us with a concise reflection, “One aspect of postmodernism...is *deconstruction*—the critical method that virtually declares that the identity and intentions of the author of a text are irrelevant to the interpretation of the text, followed by the observation that, in any case, no meaning can be found in it. All interpretations are equally valid, or equally meaningless (depending on your point of view).”<sup>340</sup>

Proponents of post-modern thought will argue that if we agree that God is incomprehensible, well then, anything can be true given that finite human thought cannot conceptualize the elusive divine nature. This thinking is simply an illusion of inclusivity and tolerance as by definition there cannot be more than one authentic reality (as we have mentioned earlier). The trap of this thinking is embedded in the intellectual argument. As this essay has clearly shown, man cannot open the gates of heaven with the power of the intellect alone but with the *heart* and with *great* ascetic struggle. What stands in the way, among other things, is the reality or belief in the uncreated energies of God. It is only through this gift, a bridge to the divine, that man is afforded the possibility to see what is authentically real. This argument has been made in countless ways in this essay. More and more Westerners are discovering this ancient and Eastern Christian truth.

The argument is, if all belief systems can be true, then it is regarded as true if it is “true for me”. McGrath asks the critical question, “How can Christianity’s claims to truth be taken seriously when there are so many rival alternatives?”<sup>341</sup> We should rather ask the question, how can the discovery of authentic spirituality be taken seriously, if not by the Transfiguration event and the endless mysteries that surround it? If the serious truth-seeker would read scripture with the Transfiguration in mind, and taking for granted the uncreated energies of God, they will experience a completely different reading.

In the context of contemporary religion, the Transfiguration is *entirely* inclusive, but not in the sense that post-modernists would assume. This inclusivity according to the Bible is embedded in the commandment that love embodies the highest state of being, where one becomes truly the image and likeness of God and is free to truly love by being released from the ‘freedom’ of captive rationalizations and interpretations. There is no denying that elements of truth can be

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<sup>340</sup> Alister E. MCGRATH. *Intellectuals Don’t Need God*, Leicester, United Kingdom, Inter Varsity Press, 1993, p. 176.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176-177.

found in various belief systems, but wholeness of truth on one side, and delusion on the other, is another matter.

Love indeed does not exclude anyone. We are all made in the image of God, and all are called to the likeness of our Creator. The life-giving energies of God are not bound within a closed sphere, but rather like an ‘open vessel’, it invites all to bask in its authentic reflections. This is beautifully explained by Dionysius, “The divine Wisdom...makes ready in a bowl the bounties of Providence which has neither a beginning nor an end, which is open to all and encompasses all. Proceeding outward to everything, it yet remains in itself and continues to be its unaltered self. It maintains its full and unfailing being, like a bowl which continues to be stable and secure.”<sup>342</sup> This adds further insight into 2 Cor 3:18 that we referred to earlier: “But we all, with *open face* beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from *glory to glory*...”. The life-giving energies of God sustain all of creation, but the transfiguring energies cannot necessarily be seen by anyone without earnestly climbing the ‘high mountain’ in truth.

## CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS

*“The world does not want religion and religion does not want Christianity. The one rejects death, the other, life.”*

*-Fr. Alexander Schmemmann<sup>343</sup>*

The principles of the Transfiguration that we explored in this essay provides modern man with an opportunity to enter into a reality that could otherwise be for most a complex theology. As we have seen, even theology is redundant for a person who has attained theosis, for their contemplation, their *gnosis*, is beyond the limits of apophatic theology. A Christian that does not progress towards the transfiguration experience remains unhatched as if in a shell, shielded from the vision of the Taboric Light, and a Christian faith that does not believe in the divinity of Christ or the divinization of man does not provide modern man with the love that he is searching for and deeply needs. The depth of his healing and restoration to the image of God will remain

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<sup>342</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the AREOPAGITE. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, [...], p. 288.

<sup>343</sup> Alexander SCHMEMANN. *For the Life of the World*, [...], p. 96.

on the surface and ultimately out of reach. Olivier Clément tells us how our society today is bereft of the true meaning of life because they do not understand the meaning of death,

Never has death been so naked and so intensely denied. Emptiness gnaws at everything...but...under the breath and fire of the [Holy] Spirit, a space of non-death opens up before us. There are some who, pushing to the limits the “memory of death,” discover in their own depths Someone who is forever interposing himself between humanity and the void: Christ risen, conqueror of death and hell. Therefore, one can risk losing and living.<sup>344</sup>

One of the characteristics of the saints is that they are masters of the “remembrance of death” where their constant preoccupation is to maintain the state of grace they have received through the love of their merciful Master in order that when death comes, they do not die, but continue to ‘be’. The Descartes proposal “I think, therefore I am” is reflective of post-modern influence on society where living is just a competition of the stature of the ego; a spiritual suicide that drags the body along with it; rather, in the Light of the Transfiguration, the saints will say will resounding joy, “Lord, please help me die before I die, so when I die, I won’t die”<sup>345</sup>. What this means is the basis of Christianity according to the patristic tradition, and evidently, the complete opposite of Descartes, that is, “I am, therefore I think”. The ego is put to death in order to put to death the passions, so when the person physically dies, he lives on in the Light of the Holy Spirit according to what we saw above in St. Anastasios of Sinai.

The saints are deified and sanctified to eternal life in *this* life. It is a life through death; true living that makes room for ‘ourselves’ and others by putting our ‘self’ aside. It is there for the taking, all one has to do is to take a risk that this reality is authentic and dare to climb the high mountain, dare to love themselves enough to give themselves the gift of death in order to live; come face to face with the Light that shames all falsehoods, where all things are surpassed; beyond all utilitarian systems, rituals, externalities and intellectual contemplation, where one finds the *kabod* of God and can say simply, “Now, I am, I don’t need to think”.

While crossing the bridge of asceticism towards Mount Tabor, along the way, man will not find any radicalism, empty religiosity, excessiveness, and certainly no fanaticism, but rather he will

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<sup>344</sup> CLÉMENT, Olivier. *You are Peter: An Orthodox Theologian’s Reflection on the Exercise of Papal Primacy*, [...], p. 98-99.

<sup>345</sup> Above the entrance on a monastery in Mount Athos there is an old epigraph that sums up Christian existentialism: “If you die before you die, then you won’t die when you die”.

be greeted by ‘himself’ and as he gazes down at the dirt he will marvel over the majesty of the sky and his dominion and responsibility over God’s creation. He will come to know the personal God personally; be set ablaze by the Comforter’s fiery Taboric rays and refreshed by His “gentle breeze”. This love is not shielded by abstractions, illusions of tolerance, worldly ideas, or religious affiliation, but the light of this love is the love of truth given freely to those who valiantly climb Mount Tabor according to their own measure of love in truth. Modern man, more than ever, is in need of this freedom to *be*, and to be truly loved by a God they can know and ‘see’. The Transfiguration experience is such an opportunity to ‘see’; to rediscover an authentic Christian spirituality and become through grace, in the words of Lossky, “an infinite *élan* as boundless as God.”<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Vladimir LOSSKY. *Dogmatic Theology: Creation, God’s Image in Man, & the Redeeming Work of the Trinity*, [...], p. 87. In a previous compilation of Lossky’s works, “élan” was translated from the original French as “movement”. See Vladimir LOSSKY. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* [...], p. 72.

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## APPENDIX I

### **Gospel accounts of the Transfiguration:**

#### **Mark 9:2–10**

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves. Now as they came down the mountain, He commanded them that they should tell no one the things they had seen, till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept this word to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.

#### **Matthew 17:1–9**

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.”

#### **Luke 9:28–36**

Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As he prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

## APPENDIX II

Figure 1



*The Trinity*, Andrei Rublev, c. 1422 -1427, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity\\_\(Andrei\\_Rublev\)#/media/File:Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(Andrei_Rublev)#/media/File:Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg)

(page consulted on 2018-12-04)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 2



*The Transfiguration by Theophanes the Greek (c. 1330-1410 AD)*

Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theophanes\\_the\\_Greek#/media/File:Transfiguration\\_by\\_Feofan\\_Grek\\_from\\_Spaso-Preobrazhensky\\_Cathedral\\_in\\_Pereslavl-Zalessky\\_\(15th\\_c.,\\_Tretyakov\\_gallery\).jpeg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theophanes_the_Greek#/media/File:Transfiguration_by_Feofan_Grek_from_Spaso-Preobrazhensky_Cathedral_in_Pereslavl-Zalessky_(15th_c.,_Tretyakov_gallery).jpeg)

## APPENDIX II

Figure 3



**The Ascension.**

Source:

<https://oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/worship/the-church-year/ascension1>

(page consulted on 2018-12-04)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 4



The Transfiguration, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt (6<sup>th</sup> century).

Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration\\_of\\_Jesus#/media/File:Saint\\_Catherine%27s\\_Transfiguration.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_of_Jesus#/media/File:Saint_Catherine%27s_Transfiguration.jpg)

(page consulted on 2018-12-09)

## APPENDIX II

Figure 5



The Transfiguration, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, Egypt (6<sup>th</sup> century).

Source:

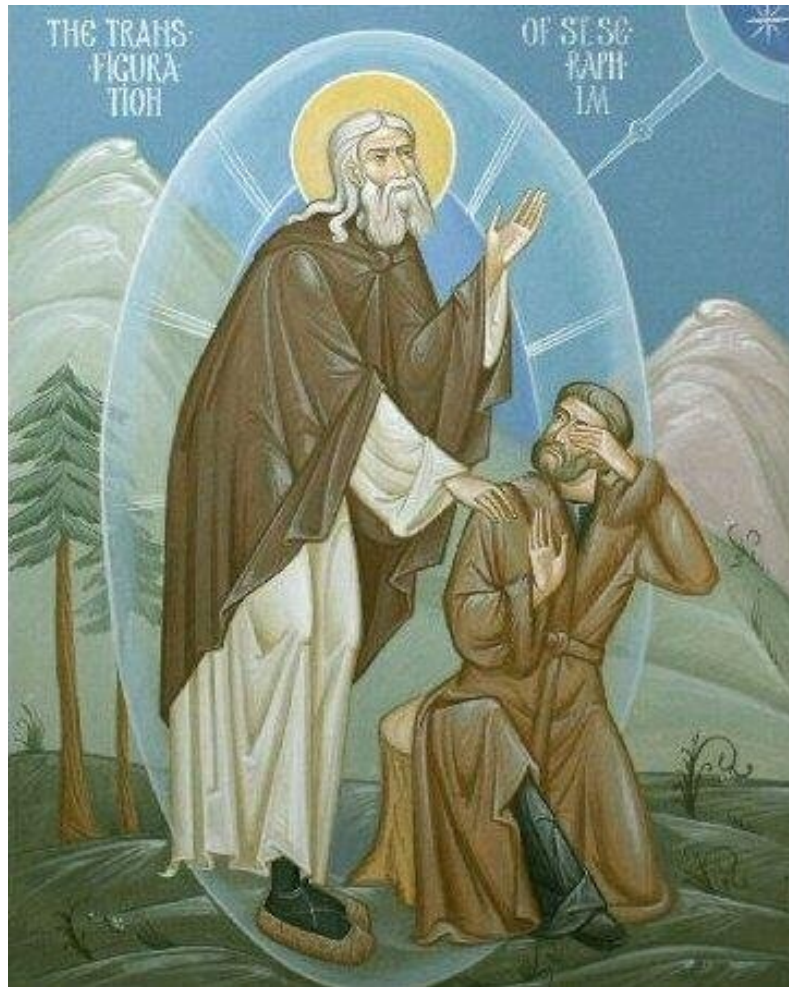
[https://news.gtp.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Apse-Mosaic\\_Sinai.jpg](https://news.gtp.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Apse-Mosaic_Sinai.jpg)

(page consulted on 2018-12-09)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 6



**The Transfiguration of St. Seraphim of Sarov.**

Source:

<https://www.stseraphim.org/wonderfulrevelation.html>

(page consulted on 2018-12-04)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 7



The Transfiguration: St. Apollinaris, Classe, Ravenna, Italy (533-547 AD).

Source:

<http://www.christianiconography.info/Edited%20in%202013/Italy/transfigurationClase.html>

(page consulted on 2018-12-22)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 8



The Resurrection (14<sup>th</sup> century): Chora monastery, Istanbul, Turkey.

Source:

[https://www.google.ca/search?q=resurrection+icon+chora&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=pbimGqaBzphquM%253A%252CivH6N64j3Y4CaM%252C\\_&usg=AI4\\_-kSh-Oek77hZ\\_eySpPh5e0sphGnKkg&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjsvKPdurTfAhVr5IMKHd9oARkQ9QEwAXoECAUQBg#imgsrc=qZkLpsZXvIzZ5M:](https://www.google.ca/search?q=resurrection+icon+chora&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=pbimGqaBzphquM%253A%252CivH6N64j3Y4CaM%252C_&usg=AI4_-kSh-Oek77hZ_eySpPh5e0sphGnKkg&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjsvKPdurTfAhVr5IMKHd9oARkQ9QEwAXoECAUQBg#imgsrc=qZkLpsZXvIzZ5M:)

(page consulted on 2018-12-22)



## APPENDIX II

Figure 9



Mosaic of the Cross (c. 1200), Santa Clemente, Rome.

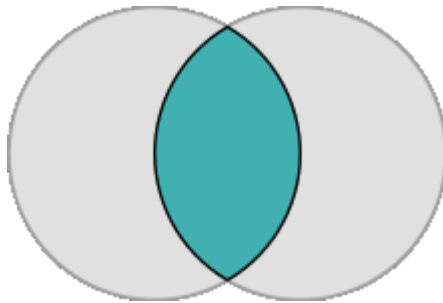
Source:

<https://deathofjesus.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/san-clemente2.jpg>

(page consulted on 2018-12-26)

## APPENDIX II

**Figure 10a**



**Vesica Piscis circles.**

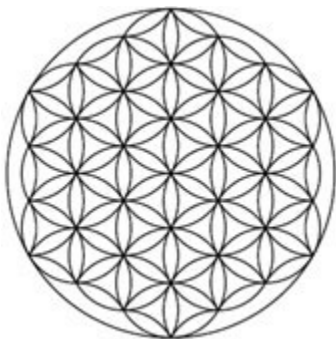
Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesica\\_piscis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vesica_piscis)

(page consulted on 2018-12-27)

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**Figure 10b**



**Flower of Life.**

Source:

<https://www.tokenrock.com/explain-flower-of-life-46.html>

(page consulted on 2018-12-27)